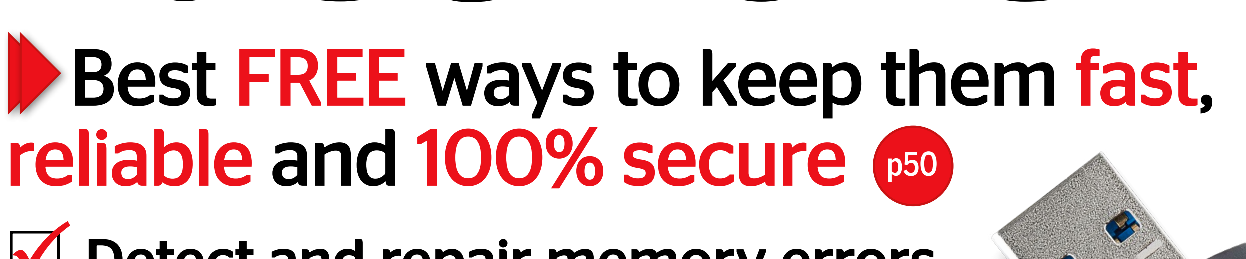


HACK YOUR HOME WI-FI

Protect your network from dodgy devices and shady software p62

Make Your USB STICKS Last Forever



- ☑ Detect and repair memory errors
- ☑ Speed up your slow USB sticks
- ☑ Block malware threats instantly
- ☑ Restore a drive's full capacity
- ☑ Stop your data being corrupted
- + Recover lost and deleted files

PLUS

SWITCH TO THIS PASSWORD MANAGER p38

Log into websites automatically

STOP GOOGLE BREAKING YOUR BROWSER EXTENSIONS

Act NOW before you lose your ad blocker p60



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Contributors Keumars Afifi-Sabet, Judith Batchelor, Dinah Greek, Jonathan Parkyn, Nik Rawlinson, Andy Shaw

ADVERTISING
Advertising Manager Alexandra Thomas

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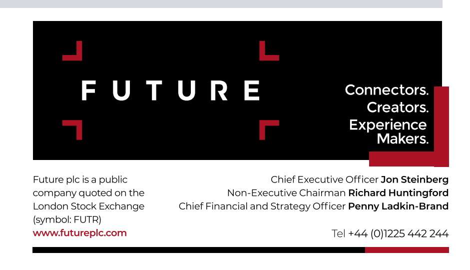
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Chief Financial and Strategy Officer **Penny Ladkin-Brand**

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

From the Editor

Archeologists in future centuries are going to hate USB sticks. They're bound to find thousands scattered around, but have no way of seeing what they contain. There's nothing we can do about that, but we can make sure our sticks survive for the next few decades at least (even if we don't!).

It's not easy though. Sticks aren't designed to live forever, and are easily broken. I've wrecked several by impatiently shoving them into laptops, then yanking them out. I even once dropped one down a lift shaft, from the 26th floor. It's probably still there.

Robert Irvine's Cover Feature won't help me recover that stick, but he does reveal the safest way to store them to avoid other disasters. He also explains how to fix errors so you'll never lose access to your data, and what to do if you can't find what you thought was saved on them. His advice will work wonders for now, but if anyone is reading this in the year 2525 I wish you all the best!

Daniel Booth
editor@computeractive.co.uk



THIS ISSUE IN NUMBERS

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14 months
How long Chinese hackers had access to details of 40 million UK voters – p9

£139
Price of the cheapest TV in Roku's new Veltech range – p8

HOW TO USE SNIPCA URLs

We use snipcas to turn long URLs that are hard to type into ones that are short and simple. They aren't websites themselves, which means they won't be recognised if you type them into Google. Instead, you need to type them into your browser address bar, then press Enter. Doing this will take you to the correct website.

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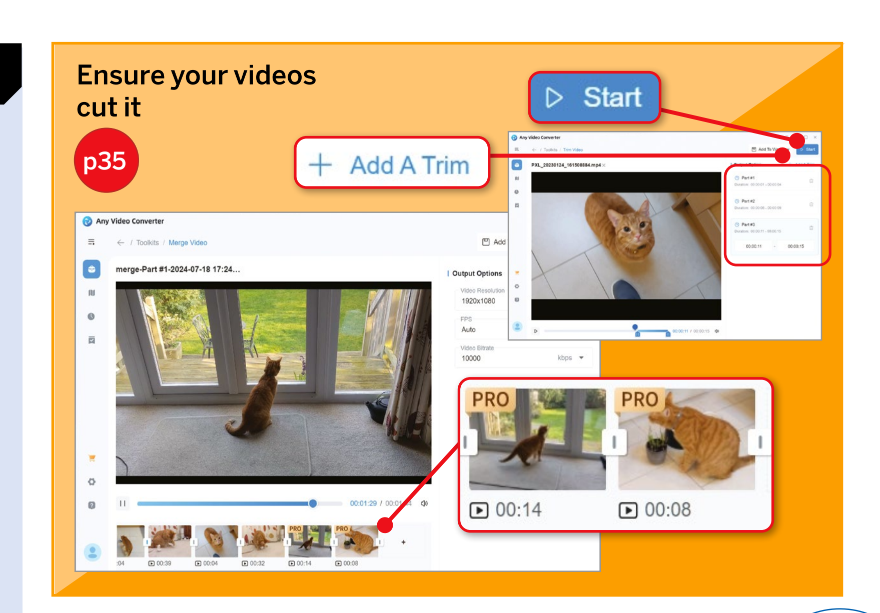
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Make Your USB STICKS Last Forever

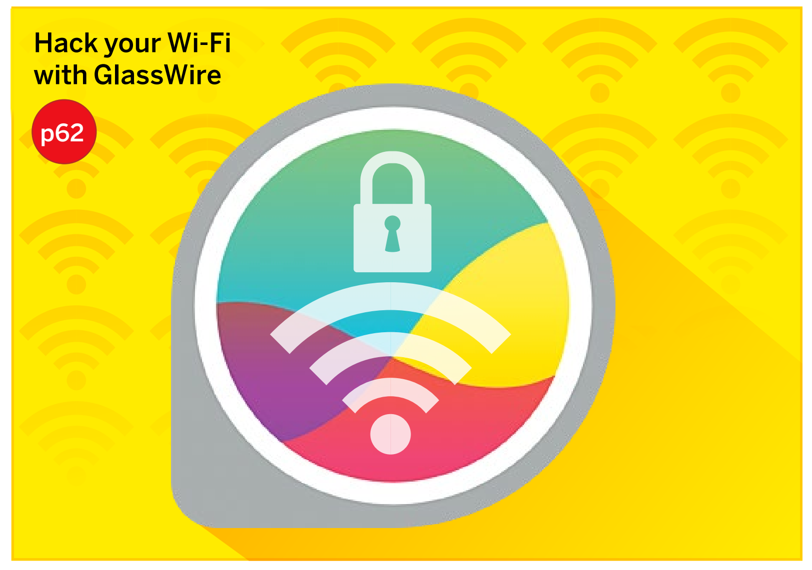
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Best FREE ways to keep them fast, reliable and 100% secure



Hack your Wi-Fi with GlassWire

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News

The top stories in the world of technology

Google ditches Chromecast for new TV-streaming device

Google has unveiled its latest TV-streaming device, the Google TV Streamer (www.snipca.com/51721). Its arrival marks the end of the popular Chromecast line of streaming sticks, as Google moves away from cheap entertainment devices. The TV Streamer will officially launch on 24 September, priced at £99.

This is the first major upgrade to Google's streaming hardware since 2020's 4K Chromecast – a cheaper HD version was released in 2022, costing £34.99. It boasts twice the memory (4GB), a lot more storage (32GB, compared with 8GB) and a processor that's 22 per cent faster than the 4K Chromecast's. This should resolve issues with sluggish navigation and app loading times that have plagued the Chromecast range.

The Google TV Streamer is a standalone box that sits next to or under your TV rather than dangling from an HDMI port as the original Chromecast dongles did. Its redesigned voice remote features a customisable button you can assign to particular services, and a new Find My Remote feature. You can trigger this by pressing a button on the back of the main box or using voice commands through a Google Assistant-compatible device.

The TV Streamer will deliver a more cinematic experience for viewers who have compatible TVs and speaker setups, thanks to its support for 4K HDR with Dolby Vision video and Dolby Atmos sound. The extra bandwidth this requires may overwhelm some Wi-Fi connections, so the TV Streamer comes with an Ethernet port for a reliable wired network connection.

WHAT WE THINK

With the TV Streamer, Google has turned its back on low-cost streaming. The new model justifies its higher price with a slew of AI-powered features, as well as serving double duty as a smart hub. Its audio and video capabilities will delight cinephiles keen to make the most of their high-end TVs and speakers. But those with more modest streaming needs will be bidding a sad farewell to Google's budget-friendly Chromecast family, as the Streamer's price high puts it out of the running.



AI features and picture-in-picture

Accompanying the hardware upgrades is a new operating system – the TV Streamer will be the first device to run Android 14 for TV. This supports Google's Gemini AI technology to deliver custom recommendations, content summaries, personalised screensavers and a new ambient mode for when the TV is idle.

Other new features include picture-in-picture mode and a new smart home panel that lets you view and control compatible smart devices from your TV, including doorbells, security cameras, thermostats and more. Naturally, the new model will support all major streaming services, including BBC iPlayer, ITVX, Netflix, Prime Video and Disney+.

Google has made clear that the release of the TV Streamer doesn't mean it will abandon existing Chromecast devices. Those will continue to receive updates and support for some time, depending on the model (see table).

WHEN WILL YOUR CHROMECAST STOP WORKING?

Model	Year released	Official end of support	Expected end of support
Chromecast	2013	31 Jul 2018	Ended (2023)
Chromecast 2nd-gen	2015	30 Sep 2020*	2025
Chromecast Audio	2015	29 Sep 2020*	2025
Chromecast Ultra	2016	6 Nov 2021*	2026
Chromecast 3rd-gen	2018	22 Oct 2023*	2028
Chromecast with Google TV 4K	2020	30 Sep 2025	2030
Chromecast with Google TV HD	2022	22 Sep 2027	2032

*Still receiving security updates as of Aug 2024

You'll like this...
Windows will make it easier to share files to and from your phone (www.snipca.com/51722)

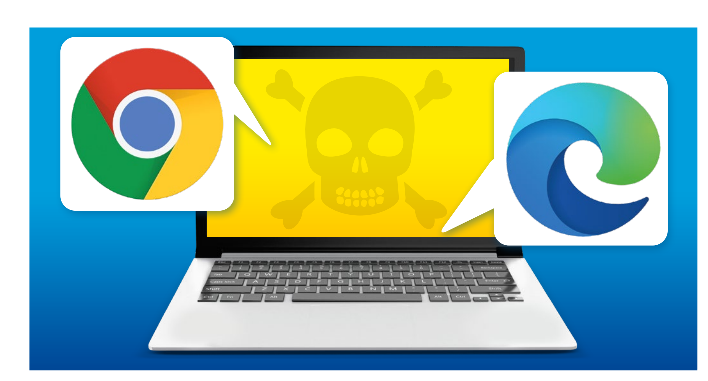
but not this...
Google now shows 'AI Overviews' above its search results in the UK (www.snipca.com/51724)

Chrome and Edge infected with malicious extensions

A recently discovered malware campaign stretching back three years has resulted in more than 300,000 Chrome and Edge users unwittingly installing malicious browser extensions. The add-ons are known to steal data and open the door to further malware infections.

According to cybersecurity company ReasonLabs, users are targeted through adverts promising free software, which direct them to fake websites that impersonate legitimate download sites. Programs offered include YouTube downloaders, Steam, VLC Media Player and password manager KeePass.

When users click links in these sites, instead of getting the software they expect, they instead download installers that are digitally signed by 'Tommy Tech LTD'. These successfully evade detection by antivirus software and run a PowerShell script that downloads a Trojan to the user's PC. This then



creates a Scheduled Task in Windows that downloads and installs the malicious browser extensions.

The extensions range from simple adware that hijacks searches by redirecting them to a different search engine to scripts that steal data and download further malware. Some versions of the Trojan even disable browser updates to stop Chrome and Edge applying security patches.

Once installed, the extensions are impossible to remove or disable through normal means – including through the browser's own add-on store. Even if users manage to remove the malicious extensions, the Scheduled Task created by the Trojan remains on their PC to wreak further havoc in future.

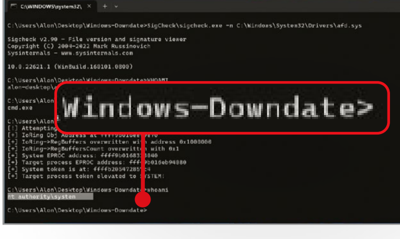
The attack is detailed in depth on the ReasonLabs website (www.snipca.com/51718), which also provides step-by-step instructions on how to remove the malicious extensions. As always, prevention is better than cure, so never download software from unknown or unverified websites.

• Learn how to stop Google breaking your extensions – page 60

Windows vulnerability could 'downgrade' your PC

A security researcher has published details of how he successfully tricked Windows into 'downgrading' itself without being detected. Alon Leviev from SafeBreach Labs has explained how he manipulated Windows Update into reverting a fully up-to-date Windows system to an earlier version that contained unfixed vulnerabilities (www.snipca.com/51719).

Using what he called 'Windows Downdate', Leviev managed to detect gaps in Windows' security systems to sneak the downgrade through without Windows detecting it. He then made the downgrade permanent by tricking the system into thinking it was fully up to date, leaving it vulnerable to further attack.



SafeBreach published the report on 7 August, six months after declaring its findings to Microsoft. The tech giant quickly published security advisories acknowledging the problem but has been forced to admit that it can't currently close the security loophole with a simple update.

To take advantage of the vulnerability, a hacker would have to be sitting at the target computer or able to access it remotely through a hack or phishing attack. This latest revelation underlines the importance of never allowing anyone except a verified technical support operative to take remote control of your computer.

IN BRIEF

MICROSOFT DROPS PAINT 3D



Eight years after Paint 3D arrived via the Windows 10 Creators Update, Microsoft has announced it will cease updates and remove the app from its store from 4 November. Paint 3D combined elements of Microsoft Paint and 3D Builder. But after Windows users said they preferred the original Paint, Microsoft shifted its focus back to that program, updating its interface and adding features such as an AI creation tool.

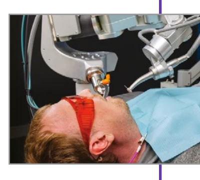
USE PROTON VPN EXTENSIONS FOR FREE

Proton VPN (www.snipca.com/51720) has made its Chromium and Firefox extensions available to all users for free. Previously only those with a Plus subscription could access the tools. The Proton VPN extension lets you connect to the fastest available server, which for free users in the UK is typically in the Netherlands. With a Proton VPN Plus plan – which costs €9.99 (around £8.60) a month – you can choose from 6,500 servers in 100 countries.

TOMORROW'S WORLD



It sounds like the plot of a horror movie but you could soon be entrusting your teeth to an AI-powered robotic arm. Dental technology developer Perceptive (www.perceptive.io) claims its AI system has already performed an unsupervised procedure on a human patient, and can replace crowns in minutes.

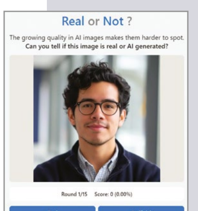


Credit: Perceptive

IN BRIEF

PLAY 'REAL OR NOT?' AI PHOTO GAME

A new website challenges you to identify whether photos are real or have been created using AI. Real or Not? (www.realornotquiz.com) asks you to click Real or Artificial (pictured) below each image. It gained popularity after Microsoft Vice Chair and President Brad Smith posted it on X: www.snipca.com/51666.



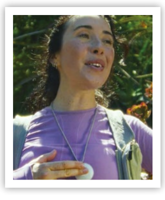
BEWARE FAKE AI IMAGE EDITORS ON FACEBOOK

Scammers are tricking users with adverts for fake AI image-editing tools on Facebook. They were spotted by Japanese security firm Trend Micro, which said installing the programs advertised infects your PC with malware (www.snipca.com/51662). For safe and genuine AI image-editing tools read Issue 688's 'Why you must use AI' Cover Feature – buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/51663.

THE WORLD'S GONE MAD!



This woman's pendant is a new AI device called 'Friend' that listens to what you say and responds in a chat window on your phone. Apparently, it comments unprompted on things that happen in your life, just like *real* friends used to. Remember them? Watch it in action at www.snipca.com/51665.



Panasonic launches Freely TVs – but new Roku TVs are cheaper

Panasonic has released its first TVs offering the UK's new Freely streaming service.

They're available in four sizes, from 43in (pictured) to 65in, with prices starting at £450 (see box below right).



Freely was launched in April by Everyone TV, which is the body that runs Freesat and Freeview.

It provides TV via the internet, as well as over the air to an aerial, and is intended as a long-term replacement for both Freesat and Freeview.

However, to get it you have to buy a new TV. It was criticised at launch for being available only on TVs made by Chinese manufacturer Hisense, but since then has become available on some Bush TVs.

Panasonic sets give more choice to customers, although they're more expensive than both Bush and Hisense TVs, which start at £230 for 43in (www.snipca.com/50784) and £249 for 32in (www.snipca.com/50800) respectively.

They come with 4K Ultra HD resolution (3840x2160p), as well as Dolby Vision and Dolby Atmos.

Freely has also been criticised for offering only 31 channels from the five main broadcasters – BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and STV. The Panasonic TVs also come with Amazon Prime Video, Disney+, Netflix and YouTube.

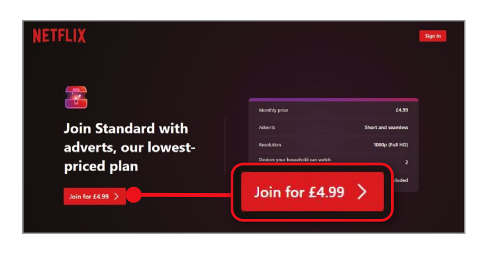
Meanwhile, Roku has partnered with UK manufacturer Veltech to release three budget TVs: 32in for £139 (www.snipca.com/51659); 40in for £189 (www.snipca.com/51660); and 43in for £209 (www.snipca.com/51661).

WHERE TO BUY PANASONIC'S FREELY TVs

- 43W60AEY 43in £450 from www.snipca.com/51653
- 50W60AEY 50in £500 from www.snipca.com/51654
- 55W60AEY 55in £600 from www.snipca.com/51655
- 65W60AEY 65in £749 from www.snipca.com/51656

Sky and EE TV scrap Netflix Basic

Sky and EE TV have become the last broadband firms to stop offering Netflix's Basic plan, marking the end of low-cost, advert-free streaming for many viewers in the UK.



It follows Netflix's decision last year to axe its Basic plan to new and rejoining customers.

Most TV and broadband providers that included Netflix as part of their packages soon responded by removing the Basic plan from their offering.

It left Sky and EE TV as the only companies still providing the plan until both withdrew it in early August.

Priced £7.99 a month, the Basic plan offered standard definition (720p) streaming on a single device, without adverts. It was the cheapest plan until Netflix replaced it last year with 'Standard with adverts', which costs £4.99 a month for two HD streams (1080p).

Sky customers will be "automatically" moved from Basic to 'Standard with adverts' in September. New EE customers will also get 'Standard with adverts', while existing customers will stay on Basic only until they renew their contract, or until late 2026 if they're out of contract.

To watch without adverts you now have to pay £10.99 for the Standard Plan, which is Full HD (1080p) and lets you stream on two devices simultaneously; or £17.99 for Premium, which provides some shows in UltraHD (4K) and streaming on four devices.

Electoral Commision slammed for Chinese hack of 40m voters

The UK's data watchdog has reprimanded the Electoral Commission for a cyber-attack that accessed the personal information of 40 million voters.

In August 2021, hackers believed to be from China exploited known vulnerabilities in the Electoral Commission's Microsoft Exchange Server.

They impersonated a user account and infiltrated the system several times before October 2022 without the Electoral Commission knowing. It gave them access to details from the Electoral Register, including names and home addresses.

An investigation by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) found that the Electoral Commission did not have "appropriate security measures in place to protect the personal information it held". In particular, it failed to ensure its servers were "kept up to date with the latest security updates".

Microsoft released fixes for the vulnerabilities targeted by the hackers in April and May 2021, just months before the attack.

"By not installing the latest security updates promptly, its systems were left exposed and vulnerable to hackers," said ICO deputy commissioner Stephen Bonner (www.snipca.com/51641).

The watchdog also said the Electoral Commission lacked "sufficient password policies in place at the time of the attack, with many accounts still using passwords identical or similar to the ones originally allocated by the service desk".

It didn't mention where the attack came from, but in March the Conservative



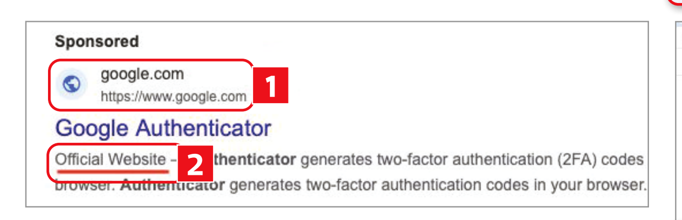
Government accused hackers backed by Chinese authorities.

The Chinese embassy in the UK said the claims were "completely unfounded" and amounted to "malicious slander".

Bonner said news of the hack had caused "considerable public alarm", but that "there's no reason to believe any personal data was misused".

He added that the Electoral Commission has taken the necessary steps to improve its security, including a plan to modernise its systems.

Scammers use fake Google Authenticator adverts



1
chromeweb-authenticators.com
2
Safety Center
Recent download history
Google Authenticator
works every day to
3
Download Authenticator

Scammers have infected Google's search results with links for fake versions of the Google Authenticator app.

The results look convincing because they show the correct URL: https://www.google.com (1 in our screenshot above), which is listed as the 'Official website' 2.

Clicking the link takes you to the fake URL chromeweb-authenticators.com. Again, it looks convincing because it appears to be a genuine Google web page (1 in our screenshot above right), with a shield logo that could easily be mistaken for the real one 2.

It contains a 'Download Authenticator' link 3 that installs malware on your computer designed to steal personal information.

To install the real Authenticator app, either search for it on your device's app store, or visit www.snipca.com/51602 (Android) or www.snipca.com/51603 (iOS).

The scam was detected by US security firm Malwarebytes. It analysed the malware's code and said it contained notes written in Russian, indicating the nationality of its creator (see www.snipca.com/51601).

IN BRIEF

TALKTALK RAISES PRICES BY FLAT £3

TalkTalk has become the last broadband firm to start raising prices by a flat £3 every year. Previously, it raised prices by the rate of inflation plus 3.9 per cent, a practice now banned by Ofcom. It affects customers joining or starting a new contract, and will apply from next April. BT, EE, Plusnet and Vodafone have already introduced a flat £3 increase.

SKY GLASS AND STREAM GET 70 NEW CHANNELS

Sky Glass and Stream viewers can watch over 70 new TV channels through the Xumo Play app, including news station Reuters and American Classics. Xumo also provides access to six new Sky channels, including Emergency 24/7 and Sky Sports Vault. They'll all come to Sky Q later this year. The app is available in the menu or by speaking its name into your voice remote. Read more at www.snipca.com/51591.



NOW TV ADDS 4K & HDR – FOR £9 A MONTH

Now TV has finally added 4K and HDR video quality to its streaming service. However, you have to pay for an Ultra Boost upgrade (www.nowtv.com/boost), which costs £9 a month. It's also not available on several devices, including Roku players and Chromecast. See Now TV's FAQs for details: www.snipca.com/51594.



Is Google's 20-year search dominance about to end?

A US judge has ruled it illegally acted as a monopoly

It took until 2006 for the Oxford English Dictionary to add 'Google' as a verb, though many people had been using it for years as shorthand for searching the web. Google overtook Yahoo to become the world's biggest search engine in 2002, and now has over 90-per-cent market share. No rival has ever come close.

But that might change thanks to US District Judge Amit Mehta, who said Google broke the law by paying billions to ensure it's the default search engine on smartphones and browsers. It could be a landmark decision in the history of the internet.



THE FACTS

- A US judge has ruled that Google illegally acts as a monopoly by paying for its search tool to be the default on phones and browsers
- It now faces heavy fines or could even be forced to spin off its search tool into a separate business
- Rival search engine DuckDuckGo welcomed the verdict, but Google says it will appeal

> "Google makes most of its money from advertising, but only if billions of people click sponsored links when searching"

The company was sued by the US Department of Justice, who argued it acts as a monopoly. Judge Mehta agreed, writing in his ruling that being the default search engine is "extremely valuable real estate" for Google, and that rivals would only ever be able to compete by promising phone and browser companies "upwards of billions of dollars" in shared revenue.

The case cuts to the heart of what Google really is. While it makes phones, apps, websites, TV devices, browsers and more, most of its money (around 75 per cent) comes from the old-fashioned business of advertising. And it can only guarantee these billions of dollars if billions of people click sponsored links when searching.

Google's critics say this creates a closed shop. The more money it makes from adverts, the more it can pay the likes of Apple, Mozilla and Samsung to be the default search engine on its browsers and phones. This throttles competition, preventing smaller search engines like DuckDuckGo from growing.

They also argue that had Google not paid this money, other tech giants might have been encouraged to build their own search tools. Apple, for example, has never built a search engine, preferring to take Google's billions – $18bn (around £14bn) in 2023 alone.

Google's legal team said people use its search engine because they find it useful. "Google is winning because it's better," said lawyer John Schmidtlein during closing arguments earlier this year. He claimed the ruling "recognises that Google offers the best search engine", but concludes that "we shouldn't be allowed to make it easily available".

Schmidtlein also claimed Google faces intense competition from both general search tools like Microsoft's Bing and specialised sites to find restaurants, airline flights and more.

Alphabet, which owns Google, said it plans to appeal against the ruling. But if it loses, it could face heavy fines, or even be forced to spin off its search engine as a separate company. Another possibility is tech companies having to add a choice of search engines when users launch a browser.

Computeractive favourite DuckDuckGo welcomed the verdict, but said "the journey" towards more choice will be long.

It added there's a "pent up demand for alternatives", but warned that Google "will do anything it can to avoid changing its conduct".

It's hard to argue with that. Google will fight the ruling with all its legal might. It needs to protect its advertising revenue.

But Google will probably never again be so dominant. Small challengers like DuckDuckGo should gain users, but Microsoft has more money to promote Bing as the main alternative. And don't rule out other tech giants like Meta or Samsung launching their own search tool.

There's no doubt who benefits most though: we do, the ordinary users. Google has ruled for too long and it's time for a change.

Scams and threats to avoid, plus new security tools

WATCH OUT FOR...

Phone malware posing as AVG antivirus

What's the threat?

Cybercriminals are infecting Android phones with malware through text messages that claim to be updates from genuine security firm AVG.

The attack was detected by Milan-based security firm Cleafy, which named the malware BingoMod. Cleafy added that the messages also claim to come from companies called Antivirus Cleanup, APKAppScudo, APP Protection, Chrome Update, InfoWeb and WebSecurity.

Once installed, BingoMod requests permission to access the Android Accessibility Suite on your phone. These are accessibility tools that make it easier to use your phone by increasing text size, turning on audio descriptions and more (see www.snipca.com/51599).

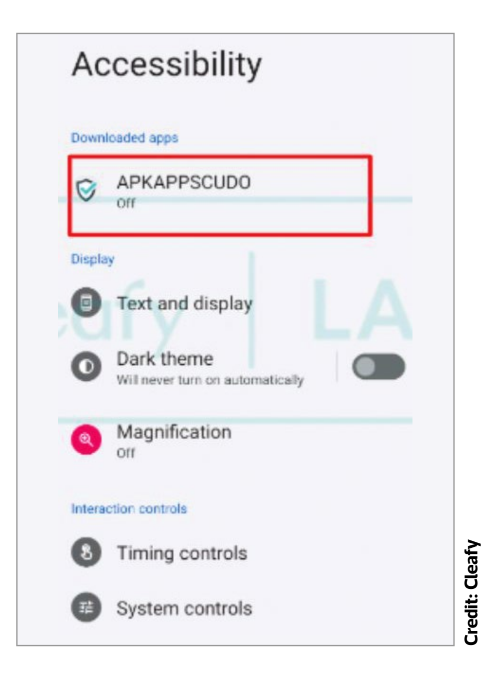
It can then track what you type into your phone, letting it steal your passwords. BingoMod also takes screenshots and reads your messages, giving it current information it can use to sign into your bank account using measures such as two-factor authentication. It then transfers your money, and wipes all data from your phone to eradicate all traces of its activity.

How can you stay safe?

Always ignore any emails or messages asking you to update an app on your phone or tablet. Instead, check whether you have any apps that need updating by opening the Google Play Store, then tapping the top-right profile initial/photo, followed by 'Manage apps and device'.

Now look under 'Updates available' for pending updates, and tap 'See details'. You'll see all apps that have updates ready. Either update them individually or tap 'Update all' at the top right.

If you're worried you may have installed BingoMod and given it – or any other dodgy app – accessibility permissions, check under 'Downloaded apps' in the Accessibility section, which you'll find in Settings. Cleafy published the screenshot above showing APKAppScudo as a downloaded app.



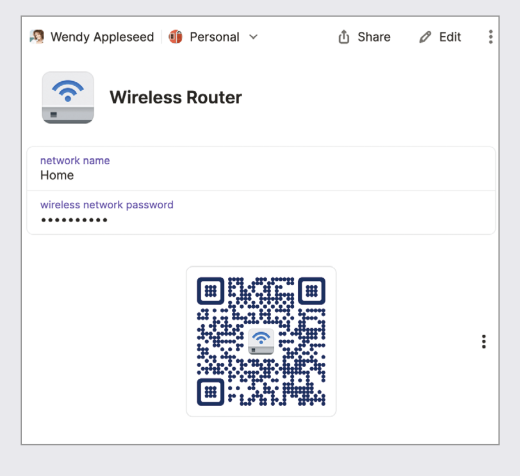
Credit: Cleafy

New tools | Share your Wi-Fi password as QR code

Sharing your Wi-Fi password with guests means reading a long and maddening combination of upper- and lower-case letters. It's much quicker to share a QR code they can scan to sign in.

1Password's app now lets you do this. Open the Wireless Router section on the mobile app, or in the Mac, Linux or Windows desktop program and you'll see the code at the bottom (see screenshot) that's ready to be shared. You can also take a screenshot or print it. Just be aware that this code will change if you update the network name or password.

If you don't see a code check that you've entered your Network Name and Network Password when creating your '1Password Wireless Router' item. Also, if you've previously set the QR code to be concealed, you'll need to select Reveal. 1Password explains more at www.snipca.com/51569. You can download its apps from www.snipca.com/51572.



ScamWatch

Readers warn readers



'Settle' your Evri account

I'd never heard of Evri, but apparently it's the new name for the courier Hermes. So I was rather confused by an email telling me Evri was holding a package for me, and I needed to "settle" the amount I owed to receive it. It was a small amount – under £3. I suppose the scammers hope some people won't quibble over a few pounds. I couldn't think of anything I had recently ordered, so assumed it was a scam. There's a big 'Proceed' button at the bottom of the email, very similar to the screenshot taken by *Which?* at www.snipca.com/51574.

Neville Brown

Warn your fellow readers about scams at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Letters

Tell us what's on your mind

I brought back cash payments in my pub

Eric Statham's Star Letter (Issue 690) about his local cashless pub having to close during July's IT outage rang true for me. Last year, I became the landlord of a pub in a small Lincolnshire town. The previous owners had decided to end cash payments during the Covid lockdowns, and didn't bring them back once life returned to normal. From what I gather, this led to a sharp fall in custom.

My first act as landlord was to reinstate cash as a form of payment, and promoted this heavily in the pub – back by "popular demand". I was thanked by so many customers for this decision. Some continued to pay by card of course, and that's fine. What matters is customer choice. It meant I wasn't affected by the problems. In fact, we had one of our busiest Fridays ever.

James Smith



People will quickly forget the chaos of IT outage

Sadly, the IT outage will have no impact on the rise of our cashless society for the simple reason that people have very short memories. Within a few months most people will have forgotten the cause of the crisis, and it will gradually slip from the minds of even those who were inconvenienced by cancelled flights or trains.

In the grand scheme of things, the outage wasn't that big a deal for most people. It was over within 24 hours, and life soon returned to normal. It was a temporary inconvenience, whereas businesses see going cashless as a permanent convenience. It would take several months of constant outages – and much lost revenue – for businesses to actually change their policy.

Peter Bradwell

Ofcom waited too long to ban inflation-linked rises

Derek Gleasure is correct to criticise Ofcom's decision to ban broadband price rises linked to inflation (Letters, Issue 690). The time for Ofcom to ban this practice was when inflation was in double digits. Instead, it dithered and allowed monthly bills to soar.

I was never particularly bothered by firms linking price rises to inflation because it seemed clear that inflation would eventually come down. Also, I assumed that firms would simply apply flat price rises across the board, which is precisely what's happened. As Derek said, this will inevitably mean larger increases proportionately for cheaper contracts.

Tony Buckman

I'm pleased you highlighted the risk that Ofcom's raft of inflation-linked price rises might lead to bigger increases. I recently got a great deal with City Fibre in Lincolnshire and Vodafone for 940Mbps broadband and phone line for £31 for 24 months.

But I then spotted there would be an annual rise of £3 over the 24-month contract. So after the first rise I'll pay 9.67-per-cent more at £34, and year two will be 8.82-per-cent more at £37. Both price rises are significantly higher than the rises of recent years, which added 3.9 per cent to the rate of inflation (which is predicted to be 2.2 per cent).

I believe, like the insurance changes of removing discounts for new customers, changes seemingly implemented to help the consumer will in fact end up costing them more, and has left businesses rubbing their hands.

Come on Ofcom, stop having the wool pulled over your eyes!

Darren Juggins

Not just services getting worse – laptops are too

In Issue 689, Warren Ramsey asked why all our tools are getting worse, and referred to the BBC iPlayer, Freesat and Netflix recently removing features.

I can add that this also applies to physical objects, particularly laptops. We're all familiar with the loss of optical drives and the reduction in the number of USB ports. These are being lost because manufacturers are making laptops thinner and lighter, which probably makes them cheaper to produce. However, if you need an optical drive, you have to buy an external unit and plug it into one of the remaining USB ports.

I'm planning to buy a new laptop to replace an old machine that can't be upgraded to Windows 11. I now find that

What's the Issue...?

I want to buy some smart plugs, but I can't find the issue where you reviewed them. Can you remind me?

David Medlycott

CA SAYS **Yes, it was in Issue 672, pages 24-25, where we compared five of the best smart plugs available.**

When was Robert Irvine's column on copying old audio CDs to a phone?

Dawn Ashworth

CA SAYS **That was in Issue 664, page 74. Read it and the review above on our 2023 Back Issue CD: www.snipca.com/48860.**

When did you explain how to find all the Freeview channels you should be getting?

Len Joplin

CA SAYS **In Issue 679's 'Secret hacks for Freeview' feature, page 62. Buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/51522.**

many have lost the Ethernet port too, requiring the purchase of an adapter and using up one of the few remaining USB ports. But more importantly most current models don't have physical buttons on the touchpad, which to me is a vital feature because it means I don't have to take up yet another port using a mouse.

I'm willing to spend up to £1,500 for a decent machine, but to get these features it seems I'll have to purchase a used laptop. I've only found a single new model that has touchpad buttons – the HP 250 G9 series. Unfortunately, this has other physical flaws. The two USB-A ports are too close together, meaning that with a USB stick inserted only one of them can be used.

Graham Rice

Will it be safe to browse the web in Windows 10?

In your reply to Mark Hallsworth (Letters, Issue 689) you state that "if you don't eventually buy Windows 11 you won't be able to browse the web at all". Your advice leaves me very confused. Do you mean that from next year Microsoft will instruct Windows 10 machines not to connect to the internet, or do you mean that you won't *safely* be able to connect?

David Morton

CA SAYS **We're happy to clarify, and sorry if our wording confused any other readers. You'll still be able to access the internet on a Windows 10 computer after Microsoft removes support in October 2025. But Microsoft will no longer release security fixes for the operating system after that date, reducing your protection from any malware you encounter when browsing the web.**

We'll provide a lot more advice on what to do as we head towards the deadline, whether you plan to keep using Windows 10, or want to upgrade to Windows 11. The latter option is becoming more popular - in July, Windows 11's market share hit 30 per cent for the first time, while Windows 10's fell to 64 per cent, its lowest since late 2019 (see www.snipca.com/51669).

Planning 30th birthday party for my LaserJet printer

In the recent debate over old printers, I'd like to offer up my monochrome HP LaserJet 5p, which I bought around August 1995 and is still going strong. The only item that needs replacing soon (I have the part in reserve) is the paper pick-up roller, which doesn't always work properly when the tray gets down to the last 10 sheets.

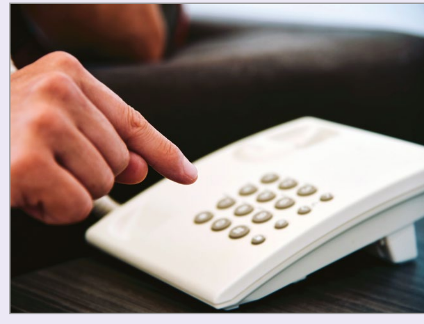
I bought it to go with my first PC, a Clone 286 with a 20MB hard drive and VGA, running MS-DOS 5.0. It also had AppleTalk along with the usual parallel port. Heady days, but we knew how to live it up back then!

If only today's printers had the same quality. I might spring her a surprise 30th birthday party next year.

Paul Hubbard

STAR LETTER

Landline is a safety net I'll never get rid of



Landlines are clearly on the way out, as indicated by your news report showing that less than half of homes now have one (Issue 690, page 8). None of my three children have a landline at home, and I doubt my grandchildren will ever know what they were. But there's something about the reassurance of a landline that makes it hard for me to stop using.

As a former computer engineer, I consider myself very confident with technology. I understand fully why the copper network is being switched off, and realise it's a necessity. But I belong to a generation (I'm 78) where for years the landline was the main form of communication.

Growing up, our family had to use a party line which, for the benefit of younger readers glued to their smartphones, meant you had to share the line with neighbours, and sometimes overheard their conversations. Local gossips loved it! When we could finally afford our own phone, it felt like a huge milestone.

Since then, I've never taken phone connections for granted. I still prefer the call quality of landlines over mobiles, and there are fewer ways in which you could find yourself losing access to a landline. I've never, for example, accidentally dropped my landline down the toilet, lost it down the back of the sofa, or had it stolen by some ne'er-do-well down the pub. Some might regard them as antiquated in this increasingly digitised world, but it's one safety net I'll never get rid of.

Arthur Hobson

The **Star Letter** writer wins a **Computeractive** mug!

Why can't phone masts be camouflaged?

Responding to the recent debate about phone masts and NIMBYs, what upsets many protesters isn't always the erection of a mast, but that they simply look so ugly. Often very little effort is made by the constructors to build a mast that's in keeping with the local area. Instead, they just look like featureless metal poles that can ruin a view.

I remember a few years ago broadband firms started to install street cabinets that were 'camouflaged' so they blended in (pictured left). Why can't phone companies do the same for their unsightly masts? Surely it can't be too hard for them to look like trees or other aspects of nature.

Helen Reeves



Consumer**active**

We stand up for your legal rights



Can I reclaim 14 years' worth of unauthorised payments?

LEAD CASE

Q Last month I discovered that for the past 14 years Norton has been taking annual payments from me, amounting to over £580. I took out a subscription in 2008, which I stopped using years ago. Norton has refunded me for this year's renewal, but can I get the rest of the money back?

Loraine Roberts



A It might be tricky for Loraine to claim the rest of her money back because it's been so long since she made the first payment. Consumers bear some responsibility for checking their bank accounts for transactions they weren't expecting, and notifying the relevant companies. Norton could argue that Loraine has accepted these payments by not challenging them for 14 years.

However, Loraine is adamant that she didn't set up a rolling subscription, so Norton shouldn't have automatically taken money from her account in the first place. We'll ask the company what's happened and whether it will consider refunding at least some of the payments.

If the company won't help, Loraine should tell her bank that she never authorised the payments in the first place. The bank must stop the company taking future payments and issue refunds for those paid, but it doesn't have to go back further than six years.

The Financial Ombudsman Service (FSO) told us customers have three years to seek a refund starting from when they notice money is being taken (see www.snipca.com/51530). Loraine has only just noticed this, so in theory she has plenty of time to get some money back.

The FSO investigates complaints on a case-by-case basis, so a lot will depend on whether it thinks Loraine could or should have been aware of the payments to Norton earlier. But even if her bank decides she's left it too late, Loraine could still complain about it to the Financial Ombudsman Service. One way or another, we think she'll get some money back.

CASE ONGOING

Am I stuck with lower broadband speeds?

Q I signed up with Pop Telecom (www.poptelecom.co.uk) because it was advertising "super-fast" speeds of 67Mbps. However, I've never got anywhere near this. My internet connection is usually below 30Mbps and sometimes even dips into single figures. The company is admitting that my speeds are low but says that's the best I can get. Do I really have to put up with this?

Chris Ames

A No he doesn't. After Chris first emailed us, Pop Telecom told him that it had asked Openreach if there was a problem with his line. If the problem can't be fixed, and Chris's speeds remain below 67Mbps, Pop Telecom must let him leave without charging him an early-cancellation fee.

If it refuses, Chris should ask the company for a deadlock letter to confirm that he has tried to rectify the problems. He should then report his case to CISAS (www.cedr.com/consumer), which is the independent ombudsman it belongs to. We'll also ask Pop Telecom to consider allowing an unhappy customer leave without charge.

CASE ONGOING

CASE UPDATE

My History offers refund for delayed software release



We have good news for reader Dave Fisher, who will now get a full refund from My History (www.my-history.co.uk). As we reported in Issue 689, back in April Dave pre-ordered the genealogy software Family Tree Maker (FTM) 2024 from My History. At the time, the program's developer, Software MacKiev, had given a tentative release date of April for the latest version.

To tempt buyers, Software MacKiev let resellers offer customers a free download of Family Tree Maker 2019 while they were waiting for the 2024 version. So after a few months, Dave was surprised to see that My History had stopped selling FTM 2024.

In his case there appear to have been some crossed wires. Software MacKiev was apparently having problems with the new version of FTM, and told My History to stop selling pre-orders, which it did. This doesn't mean the site shouldn't honour orders for which it has accepted payment. Legally it can't take money for a product it can't supply.

My History has no idea why the new version of FTM has been held up and naturally is upset that Software MacKiev didn't inform resellers sooner, so it in turn could alert customers. It told us that as soon as FTM 2024 is released, customers who pre-ordered it will receive the software.

The site is willing to give Dave a full refund, provided it can verify he's uninstalled FTM 2019 from his PC. Dave will then be removed from the list of people to receive a DVD of FTM 2024 when it's available.

Can Samsung refuse to honour free keyboard offer?

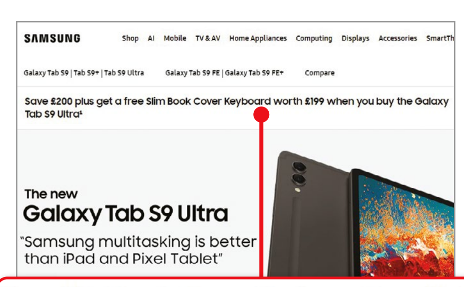
Q I bought a Tab S9 Ultra tablet for £1,299 directly from Samsung because it was offering a free Slim Book Cover keyboard worth £199. When the tablet arrived there was no keyboard, and Samsung said the offer was subject to stock being available. Do you think this is fair?

Stan Marston



A No we don't, but offers such as this usually come with caveats such as 'if available' or 'subject to stock'. Manufacturers and retailers can use these to get themselves off the hook.

However, Samsung is still promoting the offer on its website (www.snipca.com/51553, pictured). If it has genuinely run out of stock but is continuing to list this offer, Samsung is at risk of breaching unfair trading practices. When you click the link to learn more about the offer, the site tells you that the keyboard will be "automatically added" to your order. There's no indication that it's a limited offer or subject to availability.



We'll ask Samsung why it's promoting an offer it can't fulfil. We'll also ask why it told Stan he'd have to pay an "administration fee" of at least 20 per cent if he returned the tablet.

CASE ONGOING

Can you help me cancel Skype?

Q Last year I paid for a year's subscription to Skype. Now I want to cancel, but I can't seem to do it even though I've followed all the cancellation procedures online. Can you help me?

Nicos Rafidhias

A Yes, like Loraine Roberts (see opposite) Nicos should tell his bank that the payments are unauthorised and ask it to cancel them immediately. The bank must do this even if Nicos is outside the 14-day deadline for cancelling an ongoing subscription.

In the meantime, we'll look into why he's struggling to cancel his Skype subscription. Microsoft explains how to do it at www.snipca.com/51554, and also gives reasons why you might be having problems. If Nicos has Skype Credit, for example, he won't be able to see the Manage button he needs to click.

What's more, if you buy a subscription on your iPhone or iPad, you can only cancel it from that device. Similarly, if you buy it from the Google Play Store, you have to cancel on your Android device. Nicos might have bought his subscription on a mobile device, but is trying to cancel on his PC.

We've asked Microsoft whether there are any faults with the cancellation process. Perhaps some links are currently broken. If so, the company will have to refund him.

CASE ONGOING

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Manhattan had saint's patience fixing my T4-R problem

After buying a Manhattan T4-R Freeview box (from £170 from www.snipca.com/51509), I was having trouble updating its software from v1.03 to v1.05. My T4-R isn't connected to the internet, so I had to download the update to a USB stick. However, I couldn't plug this into the box.

Nothing I tried worked, so in desperation I contacted (note, not "reached out to") Manhattan by email. An assistant called Alex answered my email, and after many messages back and forth over four days he was able to put me right. I'd been missing a vital step. Alex had the patience of a saint and I was extremely glad of his help.

Now my box has been successfully updated, so I'd like to thank Alex and Manhattan very much. It was an example of customer service at its best.

Brian Blacklock

Has a company impressed you with its customer service? Please let us know: editor@computeractive.co.uk



Contact
Manhattan

- **Online support** www.snipca.com/51510
- **Phone** 0208 450 0005

Grow Your Family Tree





If you think your criminal ancestors were punished by being sent overseas, follow **Judith Batchelor's** advice to...

Find convicts sent to Australia

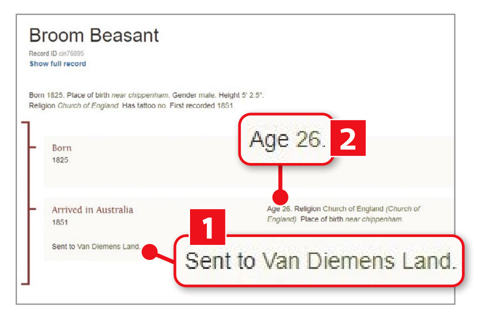
From 1787 until 1867, over 160,000 convicted criminals (including 25,000 women), were transported across the seas to Australia. Most were banished for seven or 14 years and never returned. Records online can show details about your ancestor's trial, as well as their sentencing, imprisonment, transportation, and any information kept by the colony after their arrival.

Search the Digital Panopticon

The Digital Panopticon website (www.snipca.com/51377) brings many of these records together, covering the details of 90,000 convicts. Click 'Search' at the top, then enter names and keywords, such as location. Click 'Add more search criteria' to add details such as occupation, year of birth, where they were imprisoned and even whether they had any distinguishing marks or tattoos.

I searched for my ancestor Broom Beasant, a mason from Bremhill in Wiltshire, and discovered he was transported to Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania) in 1851 (1 in our screenshot below left), aged 26 2.

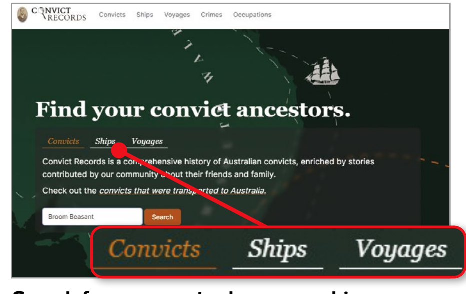
Clicking 'Show full record' or 'More details' brings up extra information. It tells me Broom was sentenced to seven years for stealing a mason's tools, that he sailed on the ship Rodney, and that he was 62.5 inches tall – about 5ft 2½in.



Judith's ancestor Broom Beasant was transported to Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania) in 1851, aged 26

Browse Ancestry and Findmypast records

From 1791-1892, all felonies (serious crimes) were recorded in criminal registers, which are available to subscribers on Ancestry and Findmypast. On Ancestry, I found Broom Beasant recorded in several records, including 'Criminal Registers 1791-1892' (www.snipca.com/51360) and 'Prison Commission Records 1770-1951' (www.snipca.com/51361). I also found him in Findmypast's collection 'Crime, Prisons and Punishment 1770-1935' (www.snipca.com/51362).



Search for an ancestor by name, ship or year of voyage on Convict Records

If you're an Ancestry or Findmypast subscriber in Australia, or have a worldwide subscription, you'll also be able to search records stored in Australia.

Another good source is Convict Records (www.snipca.com/51378), which has details of over 147,000 convicts, and lets you search by name, ship or voyage year (see screenshot above). When I searched for Broom Beasant it gave the same data I'd found on Digital Panopticon, but added that he married Mary Hutchinson in Norfolk, Tasmania. It also mentions the person who provided the information online – who you could consider contacting for more information.

For further research, browse the 22 million digitised newspaper pages on Trove, the website of the National Library of Australia (www.snipca.com/51252). Note that not every convict sentenced to transportation actually left English shores, as some ended up serving all their sentence in a prison ship or penitentiary.

Finally, if your ancestor was tried at the Old Bailey in London, search for details at www.oldbaileyonline.org. Search first by known names, but remember it was quite common for criminals to use aliases. For example, Broom Beasant liked to call himself Broom Slade.

Your **Genealogy** Problems Solved

One of my ancestors appears on the passenger list of a ship sailing from Glasgow to Quebec in 1885. There's no record of them at all in Canada. If they had died at sea on the voyage, where would their death be recorded?

Brian Dishon

If your ancestor died at sea during their voyage, their death should have been notified to the British authorities. The National Archives has a guide to records of births, marriages and deaths at sea or abroad (www.snipca.com/51239), while Findmypast has indexes to deaths at www.snipca.com/51243.

With British-registered ships, deaths also had to be recorded in the ship's log – see these on the non-conformist records on TheGenealogist: www.snipca.com/51241.



Have a genealogy question for Judith? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk with 'Grow Your Family Tree' in the subject line.

Next issue: Search coastguard records



USB-C DOCK

USB C DOCK
65W
DISPLAY PORT
USB HUB
RJ45
POWER CABLE
ETHERNET CABLE
USB-C CABLE

DESKTOP MONITORS

SIMPLIFY YOUR WORKSPACE WITH THE INTEGRATED USB-C DOCK

The USB-C dock on the iiyama XUB2797QSN-B1 simplifies your workspace by using a single cable to display content and charge your laptop.

With additional USB-ports, your wireless mouse and keyboard or webcam can also be connected to the monitor for seamless plug and display solution. The added benefit of the high resolution 2560x1440 IPS LCD display makes all the difference for image clarity and productivity, boosted further with the ability to connect to a secondary display for a power multi-display workspace. **Available also in white colour: ProLite XUB2797QSN-W1**


























Best Free **Software**

Robert Irvine recommends new programs that won't cost you a thing

FILE MANAGER

Files 3.6

www.snipca.com/51182
What you need: Windows 10 or 11

Just two months after its last major update (see Issue 688, page 18), this brilliant free alternative to File Explorer has released yet another new version, with lots of new features and improvements.

These include a new 'Tab actions menu', which you access by clicking its button in the top-left corner of the program's interface. This menu includes options for opening a new Files window, rather than a new tab in the current one, and switching to compact view when you want to shrink the window size to free up screen space.

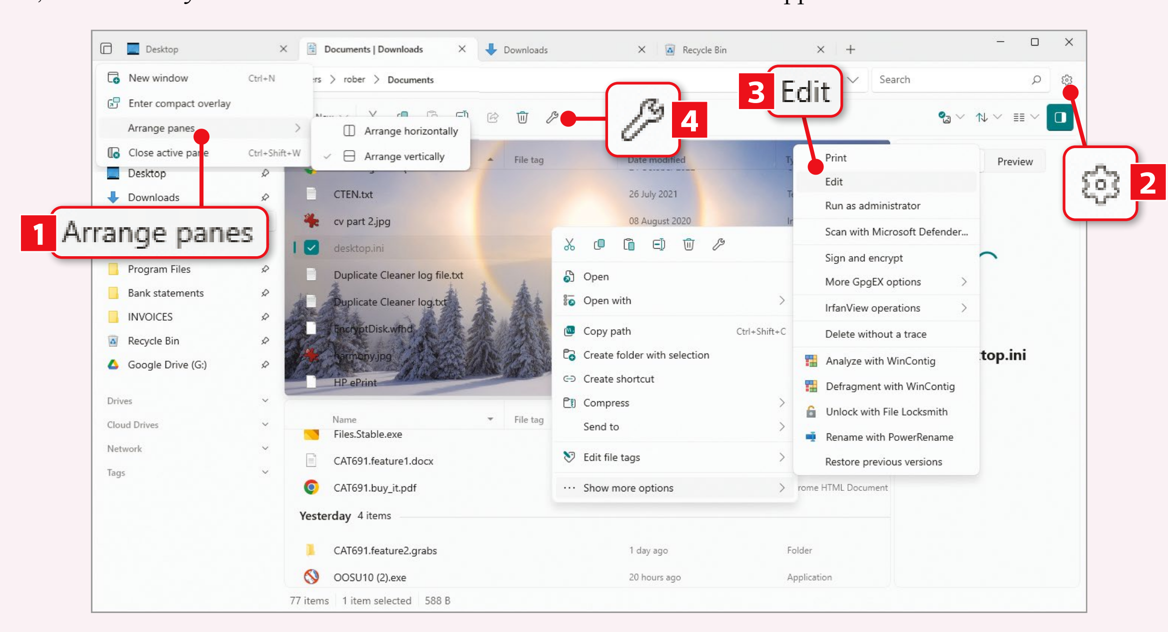
The 'Tab actions menu' also lets you switch to dual-pane mode, so you can view two folders or drives simultaneously. Previously, this mode displayed the panes side by side, but Files 3.6 gives you the option to stack them on top of each other instead.

Select 'Add pane' in the menu and choose either 'Add horizontal pane' or 'Add vertical pane', depending on your preference, or use the keyboard shortcuts Alt+Shift+H or Alt+Shift V. You can then drag the border of either pane to resize it accordingly, and press Ctrl+Shift+W to return to standard, single-pane view.

However, the most exciting new feature in Files 3.6 is undoubtedly the ability to customise the background of your folders with your own images. Sadly, this isn't as simple as right-clicking and choosing a picture – instead you have to edit a folder's hidden 'desktop.ini' file.

To reveal this file in Windows folders, click the Settings cog in the top-right corner and choose 'Files & folders' then 'Hidden items'. Switch on 'Show hidden files and folders' and 'Show protected system files'. Follow the instructions at www.snipca.com/51714 to customise a folder's background.

As ever, when you download Files from www.snipca.com/51713, make sure you click the tiny 'classic installer' link to get the free program rather than the paid-for Microsoft Store app.

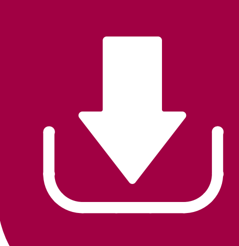


1 The new 'Tab actions' menu in Files lets you quickly open a new program window and shrink the main layout to a 'compact' view. Choose 'Add panes' then 'Arrange panes' to view two folders simultaneously in horizontal or vertical dual-pane mode.

2 You can set folders to open in dual-pane mode automatically, rather than in new tabs. Click the Settings cog in the top-right and, on the General tab, select 'Open tabs in dual-pane mode'. Choose between horizontal and vertical arrangement.

3 To customise a folder's background by adding an image, you need to show hidden and system files, as described above. Once done, right-click the 'desktop.ini' file in a folder and choose 'Show more options' then Edit to edit it in Notepad.

4 It's also possible to change the icon that represents a folder in Files. Click the 'Open properties' (spanner) button on the toolbar and choose Customisation. Select the icon you want to use from the available designs, then click Save to apply.

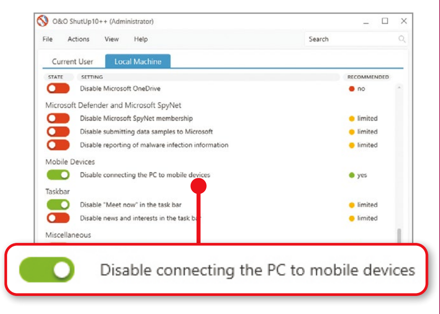


PRIVACY TOOL

O&O ShutUp10++ 1.9.1439

www.snipca.com/51712

What you need: Windows 10 or 11



Not long after our Workshop on O&O ShutUp10++ in Issue 689 (page 38), the excellent free tool has been updated again to provide even more solutions to Windows annoyances. The new options in this version tackle features that link your PC to your phone. While some people find these useful, they can compromise your privacy.

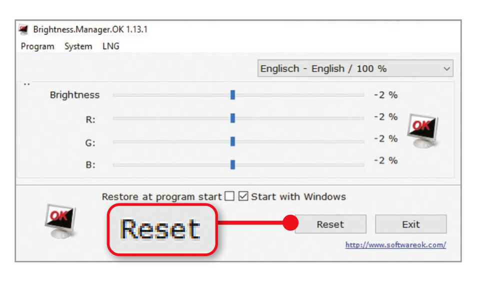
To stop Windows connecting to your phone, and prevent data from being shared between the two devices, click the Local Machine tab, scroll down to the Mobile Devices section and switch on the setting 'Disable connecting the PC to mobile devices' (see screenshot). Depending on which version of Windows you're using, you should find further options on the Current User tab, including 'Disable access to mobile devices', 'Disable Phone Link app' and – best of all – 'Disable showing suggestions for using mobile devices with Windows'.

DISPLAY TOOL

Brightness.Manager.OK 1.13

www.snipca.com/51717

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11



This tiny (68KB) tool makes it easy to adjust the brightness of your screen, whether it's too dark to read properly or so glaring that it hurts your eyes. Rather than fiddle around with monitor settings or the slider in the Windows Action Centre – which many users find is greyed out – you can use the controls in Brightness.Manager.OK to adjust your screen's radiance and hue. It offers separate sliders for brightness, red, green and blue, which you can drag left or right until your screen looks just the way you want – click Reset (see screenshot) to undo your changes. You can set the program to start alongside Windows, and to restore any adjustments you've made every time you launch it. Click the System menu for quick access to Windows tools including Power Options, 'Battery saver' and (oddly) your Screen Saver settings.



SHOULD I PAY FOR...?

Choose the right version of software

CtrlHelp

www.snipca.com/51716

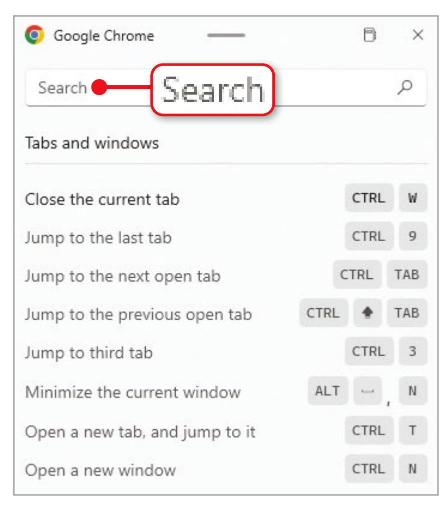
Price: £8.39 **Free trial:** 14 days

What you need: Windows 10 or 11

Lots of Windows software supports keyboard shortcuts, which let you perform specific actions quickly without using your mouse or navigating lengthy menus. But it's not always obvious what those shortcuts are, and remembering which keys you need to press can be tricky.

CtrlHelp makes life easier by providing details of more than 8,000 keyboard shortcuts for 800 programs. These include web browsers such as Chrome and Firefox, media players, image editors, office software, video-chat clients, and file managers – including Files (see opposite page).

Simply hold down Ctrl on your keyboard to open a scrollable list of shortcuts for the active program. You can search for a particular shortcut (see screenshot), and either click its entry or press the key combination to perform the relevant command.

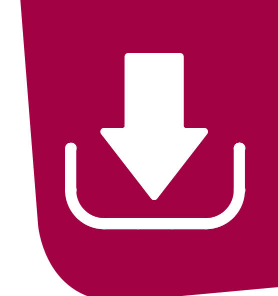


As well as this 'cheat sheet', CtrlHelp has a 'practice mode', which you launch by clicking its system-tray icon. This guides you through collections of shortcuts for its supported software – so you can practise pressing the keys for each command – then tests you on what you've learned.

Although some programs provide details of their 'hotkeys' on their websites, or display them when you press a shortcut (assuming you know what that is), CtrlHelp is a more convenient option – and reasonably priced, too. A rival tool called CheatKeys costs $19.99 (www,cheatkeys.com) and supports fewer programs.

OUR VERDICT: Pay for it

CtrlHelp offers a speedy way to access and master keyboard shortcuts for a wide range of software, saving you time and also helping with accessibility needs. You can try it for free for 14 days to decide whether you think it's worth the one-off purchase price.



What should I download?

We advise you which software and apps to use

Which program shows space occupied by files and duplicates?

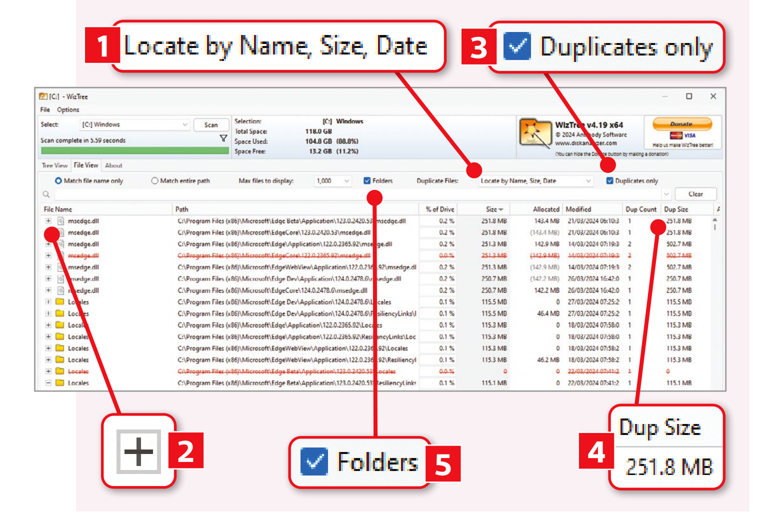
Q I'm looking for a program that can do two things – show how much space files and folders are taking up, and locate duplicates so I can get rid of them. I can find tools that do one or the other, but not both. Am I wanting too much?

Les Abrahams

A No, you can do both those things using the excellent WizTree (www.snipca.com/51297), which has long been our favourite program for analysing storage space. It's fast, free for personal use, and has a colour-coded 'tree map' to make it easy to spot the space hogs. Then, just when we thought it couldn't get any better, version 4.19 arrived in March with a tool for identifying duplicates.

First, use WizTree to scan your PC, then click the File View tab to switch from the default Tree View. You'll see a new Duplicate Files option on the toolbar. Click its dropdown menu and select either 'Locate by Name, Size, Date' (1 in our screenshot) or just 'Locate by Name, Size'.

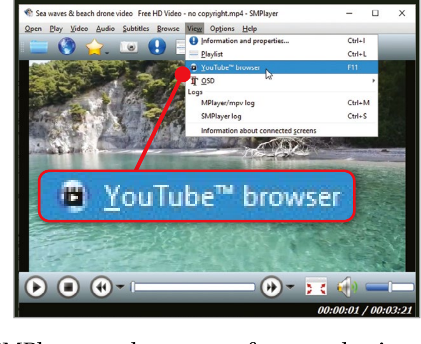
WizTree will then update its scan results to mark duplicate files with a plus symbol 2. Click one to see details of the duplicates, and tick 'Duplicates only' 3 to see only those files. The Dup Count column tells you the number of copies, while Dup Size reveals how big they are 4. By default WizTree only shows duplicate files. To see folders as well, tick this box on the toolbar 5.



Can I watch YouTube from my desktop?

Q I'm giving up on Windows Media Player, and want a free alternative that lets me watch videos installed on my PC and browse YouTube from my desktop. Is there such a program?

Leo Adams



A Yes, it's called SMPlayer, and was one of our readers' 10 favourite programs in 2023 (see Issue 674's Cover Feature). It plays nearly all video and audio formats. To watch YouTube within it, download the SMTube plug-in (www.smtube.org), then click View and select 'YouTube browser' (see screenshot). Search for a video, then click 'Proceed' and watch without ads.

How do I manage files on my Android tablet?

Q I've just removed loads of unused apps from my Android tablet, including 'File Recovery & Data Recover'. I couldn't recall installing this, so looked it up online and was alarmed to read it contained malware. What's the best file-managing alternative?

Harold Carney



A Try 'File Manager' (www.snipca.com/51267). Open it, and you'll see a simple home page with clean icons, with the Downloads folder at the top (1 in our screenshot). Click 'Storage Analysis' 2 to see what type of files are taking up space, and Settings 3 for more features, including alerts when your storage is almost full (from 85 to 99 per cent).

Email us your questions at letters@computeractive.co.uk

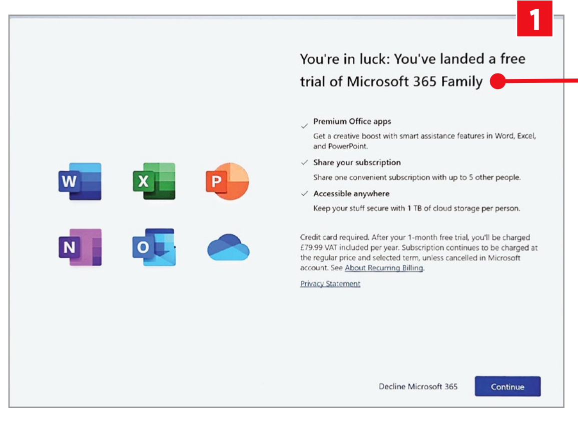
Named & Shamed

Keumars Afifi-Sabet puts the boot into tech villains, jargon-spouting companies and misbehaving software

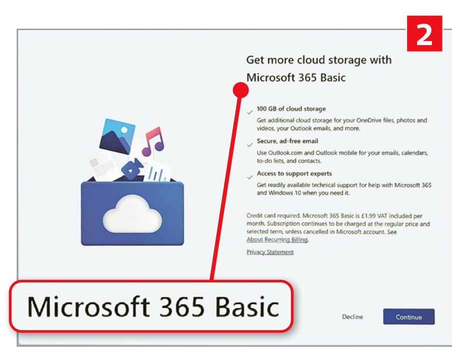
SOFTWARE WARNING!

Microsoft's manipulative update adverts

I often leave Windows updates so late that my PC starts screaming at me when I'm midway through a task. Restarting my machine breaks my flow, so I put it off as long as I can. But I couldn't resist the update to Windows 11 24H2 (build 26100.863) – only available to Windows Insiders at present – as it's packed with new AI tools that promise to revolutionise my PC (if you believe Microsoft's hype that is).



There's no luck involved – Microsoft 365 Family is always available as a free trial



Keumars also declined this Microsoft 365 Basic advert

Annoyingly though, Microsoft seems to be using the update as a chance to bombard users with even more adverts for its products. After restarting my PC, I entered my login details on the lock screen, but it then redirected me to a window prompting me to "finish setting up my PC". This rubbed me up the wrong way because I'd already set up my laptop – an HP Spectre x360 14 – exactly the way I wanted it when I got it in April.

After cycling through a few pointless messages, I paused at a banner advert claiming it was my lucky day for having "landed a free trial of Microsoft 365 Family" (see screenshot 1).

But there's no luck involved in getting a free one-month trial – Microsoft offers it all the time to anyone who wants it at www.snipca.com/51637. I didn't want it, so I clicked Decline. Sadly, the message fell on deaf ears and Microsoft then badgered me with an ad for Microsoft 365 Basic 2.

Microsoft regularly promotes OneDrive and Edge as desktop notifications, which you can easily ignore, but these full-screen adverts are a new low. Microsoft knows that many users will be convinced that they have to accept the offers to complete the Windows update. It's cynical and manipulative and I hope nobody falls for them.

Tough luck, Microsoft.

WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?

WHAT THEY SAY

Conway Lee, head of BenQ, on MOBIUZ gaming monitors
www.snipca.com/51552

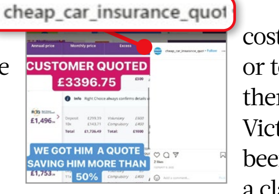
"'Unveiling the Unseen' is the goal that MOBIUZ aims to achieve. We invite gamers to venture into the unknown with us and gain the courage to face all challenges. Marching at the forefront of the future, MOBIUZ is with you."

WHAT THEY MEAN

We're also unveiling previously unseen levels of jargon to persuade gamers to spend £800 on monitors.

KEUMARS' VILLAIN OF THE FORTNIGHT

Wahidullah Usmani



Wahidullah Usmani's big mistake was not realising the main purpose of Instagram is for narcissistic celebrities to show off their absurdly pampered lifestyles. Instead, he thought he could use it to act as a 'ghost broker' – ie, sell fake car insurance by posing as a middleman between customer and company.

The 22-year-old from Cricklewood, north London, forged documents and falsified customer details to reduce the cost of the premium, or took out a genuine policy then cancelled it soon after. Victims only realised they'd been tricked when they made a claim or were questioned by police. Usmani used the account name @cheap_car_insurance_quotes (see screenshot) and made over £17,000 before being caught. He pleaded guilty in June and was sentenced to two years in prison, suspended for two years.

DESKTOP PC | **£1,250** from Palicomp www.snipca.com/51529

Palicomp AMD Destiny

Need for speed



We always like to highlight the best-value PCs available, and the various mini PCs we've reviewed recently have often offered a lot of Windows power for very little money. However, if you want optimal PC performance – perhaps because you use more demanding software or you want a PC that will meet your expectations for years to come – then you may have to spend a little more. And the Palicomp AMD Destiny may just be what you're looking for.

It's powered by an AMD Ryzen 7 7800X3D processor, backed up by 32GB of RAM and a 1TB SSD. It isn't the fastest all-round processor we've come across, but it's been specifically configured to run games at a blistering pace, and it's no slouch at other tasks either.

That said, in raw processing power it can't quite match the AMD Ryzen 7 8845HS chip in the Beelink SER8 mini PC (£849 from www.snipca.com/51331) we reviewed in Issue 690. However, it's slower only by around four per cent, and it's still twice as fast as the AMD Ryzen 7 5700G chip in our favourite desktop PC the Palicomp AMD Cobra (£400 from www.snipca.com/43515, see page 30).

> "The fastest graphics performance we've ever seen, but it doesn't come cheap"

This doesn't quite translate into Windows performance, where the Destiny is only 30-per-cent faster than the Cobra, which just goes to show what great value for money that PC still is for Windows users.

The Destiny has a secret weapon, though, in the form of a 12GB Palit GeForce RTX 4070 Super graphics card. If you were to buy this separately it would cost around £500, and it provides the Destiny with the fastest graphics we've ever seen.

It ran our suite of test games in 4K resolution at an average of 104fps – we rarely see this kind of performance at 1080p, let alone 4K. In gaming performance benchmark tests, it was 85-per-cent faster than the previous fastest gaming PC we've seen (the Cyberpower Infinity X147 GRE Gaming PC, £1,830 from www.snipca.com/48558, reviewed in Issue 674). For the price, that's a phenomenal return.

This, then, is the ideal desktop PC for running games, such as Microsoft Flight Simulator, at their highest resolutions and optimal graphical settings. Those who prefer to browse a few web pages and crunch through the odd spreadsheet won't find as much to get excited about.

Its 1TB of storage falls short of the Cobra, which currently comes with a 2TB SSD. If 1TB isn't enough there's an empty M.2 slot on the motherboard for adding more, while removing the right-hand panel of the case reveals two mounting spaces for 2.5in SSDs and one 3.5in hard-drive caddy.

If you'd prefer not to do all that yourself, or would like a slightly different specification, you can configure alternative components before you buy on Palicomp's website.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core AMD Ryzen 7 7800X3D processor • 32GB RAM • 12GB Palit GeForce RTX 4070 Super graphics card • 1TB SSD • Windows 11 Home • 449x200x390mm (HxWxD) • Three-year warranty www.snipca.com/51529

VERDICT When it comes to running games this is the fastest PC we've seen to date, but it's expensive if you only need a PC for everyday Windows tasks

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE Palicomp AMD Cobra £400 If you don't need the graphics power, this PC provides brilliant Windows performance for a third of the price



LAPTOP-TABLET | **£949** from HP www.snipca.com/51537

HP Envy x360 13in

Return to the fold



The HP Envy x360 13in is a 2-in-1 laptop that lets you flip the keyboard all the way back, so you can use its touchscreen as you would a tablet. Unsurprisingly, however, it lacks the lightweight, slim feel of a tablet, measuring 16mm in thickness rather than the 7mm of a typical iPad, while weighing twice as much. Still, it's a handy option if you want a laptop that offers versatile ways of working.

This flexibility comes at a cost – £949 is more than we'd expect to pay for a laptop with a 13.3in screen. And the price is hardly justified by its specification, which is based around a 12th-generation Intel Core i7-1250U processor, 16GB of RAM and a 512GB SSD.

> "A versatile machine with a stunning screen and long battery life, but slower than rivals"

That looks a bit meagre compared with our current favourite laptop, the Dell Inspiron 14 Plus (£749 from Dell at www.snipca.com/51167, see page 30), which has a more cutting-edge processor (the Intel Core Ultra 7 155H) and twice the storage (1TB).

The difference between the two came into sharp focus during our benchmark tests. With very simple tasks the difference is fairly negligible, with the Inspiron's newer processor running around five-per-cent faster. When we put the processor's cores under more pressure, however, the Inspiron was 63-per-cent quicker, handling more demanding software with ease. During our graphics tests, the graphics hardware in the Envy's older processor really showed its age, running at one third of the speed of the Inspiron.



If that leaves you wondering where HP spent its budget, look no further than the screen. It uses IPS technology to provide an entirely superior viewing experience when compared with its rival. It goes pretty bright, peaking at 476cd/m², and recreates 98 per cent of the sRGB colour standard and 72 per cent of DCI-P3. In short, it's stunning to look at.

The Envy also excels in battery life, lasting nearly 15 hours when handling regular Windows tasks and playing continuous video for 15 hours 37 minutes before giving up.

The whole thing feels sturdily built, too, offering comfortable typing and a responsive touchpad and touchscreen. It's well equipped with ports, including two Thunderbolt 4-equipped USB-C ports, two USB 3.0 ports, Wi-Fi 6E and Bluetooth 5.3.

SPECIFICATIONS

Ten-core Intel Core i7-1250U processor • 16GB of RAM • Intel Iris Xe graphics • 13.3in 1920x1200-pixel IPS screen • 512GB SSD • 2x USB-C ports • 2x USB 3 ports • Wi-Fi 6E • Bluetooth 5.3 • Windows 11 Home • 16x298x215mm (HxWxD) • 1.38kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/51537

HOW WE TEST

Computeractive is owned by Future PLC, which employs a team of specialist technical reviewers. You'll often read references to our benchmark testing, which is a method of assessing products using the same criteria. For example, we test the speed of every PC and the battery life of every phone and tablet in exactly the same way. This makes our reviews authoritative, rigorous and accurate.

Future PLC also owns the magazines *Maximum PC*, *PC Pro* and *T3*, and the websites Laptop Mag (www.laptopmag.com), TechRadar (www.techradar.com) and Windows Central (www.windowscentral.com). This means we can test thousands of products before choosing the most relevant for *Computeractive*.

FAIR AND IMPARTIAL

Our writers follow strict guidelines to ensure the reviews are fair and impartial. The manufacturer has no involvement in our tests.

OUR AWARDS



We award every product that gets five stars our Buy It! stamp of approval. It means we were extremely impressed by the product, and we think you will be too.



Every product that gets a four-star review is given the Recommended award. We highly recommend these products, although they just fail to meet the high standard of our Buy It! winners.

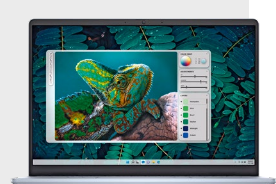
PRICES

Our reviews contain a link to the best price we found online at the time of press.

VERDICT Offers a better screen and more flexible working than our current favourite laptop, but lacks the processing power



ALTERNATIVE Dell Inspiron 14 Plus £749 A more powerful processor gives this laptop the edge in more demanding tasks, but the screen isn't as good



PRINTER | **£220** from HP www.snipca.com/51488

HP OfficeJet Pro 9730e

That inking feeling

Computer active RECOMMENDED ★★★★

With twin trays capable of holding 250 sheets each, this wide-fronted multifunction printer should be enough to satisfy anyone who regularly needs to produce larger A3 prints. In addition to duplex colour printing, it can also scan and copy.

The downside is that it's a big old unit, measuring 386x581x467mm (HxWxD). However, this does provide the opportunity for plenty of paper-storage capacity – 500 sheets across the two trays alone. It's also a heavy piece of kit, weighing a hefty 19.5kg before you load it with paper. Given its bulk it's unlikely to fit on the same desk that you work on.

> "A hefty A3 printer that turns out sharp and vibrant documents and photos"

While the printer and scanner bed can handle any size up to A3, the automatic document feeder (ADF) on the top is limited to 35 sheets of A4, so it can't copy multiple pages of A3 automatically. The output tray is limited to 75 pages.

At the rear are Ethernet and USB ports, but you can also connect it wirelessly. It can print on most paper, including envelopes, but HP doesn't recommend loading anything heavier than 105gsm, which rules out even quite thin card.

To set up the HP OfficeJet Pro 9730e, you simply load a few sheets of A4, turn it on and follow the on-screen prompts. These will explain how to set the region and load the four inkjet cartridges. You can run out a test page at this point to ensure your nozzles are aligned and working properly. Then you'll need to switch to the companion app to get your printer online.



When using the HP Smart app, you won't need to type in your Wi-Fi password as that data will be transferred for you. The whole process is very easy and it worked first time when we tried it.

The only frustrating thing about HP's setup instructions is the way you are railroaded into signing up for an HP+ subscription at every turn. We had to decline five times before the OfficeJet Pro grudgingly allowed us to start printing. Once you get going, however, the job is made easier by the large tilting colour touchscreen (pictured below left) that has an interface that's as intuitive as the excellent app.

We achieved impressive results during testing. It churned out consecutive pages of monochrome text as quickly as the claimed 22 pages per minute (ppm), though switching to auto-duplex mode (double-sided) slows the print rate considerably.

Black printed characters are sharp and clean on plain paper, even at the smallest font sizes. In draft mode, single-sided printing is faster (around 34ppm) with very little compromise in quality.

Switching to colour test pages, the results remained impressive. HP's ink makes for vibrant documents and vivid photos. There's no bleeding of inks and fine detail is rendered clearly. Photos on glossy photo paper are especially pleasing thanks to the eye-catching colours.

The printer comes with enough ink to cover 800 pages of black text and 420 pages of colour. Replacement cartridges do better, with the highest-capacity options printing 2,500 pages of black or 1,650 pages across the three colour cartridges.

Using the prices of HP's own cartridges, that works out at 3p per page for A4 mono and 9.5p per A4 in colour. That's a lot more than you'd pay if you were using a tank-based inkjet printer, but isn't extortionate for a cartridge-based model.

Scanning using the 11x17in platen worked well, as did copying via the ADF. The document scanner is capable of automatic two-sided scanning, so you can duplicate both sides of a document without having to turn the paper over yourself.

SPECIFICATIONS

3-in-1 printer, copier and scanner • A3 size • Four-ink cartridge system (1x black, 3x colour) • 500-sheet paper capacity (2x 250-sheet paper trays) • 1200x1200dpi print quality • 1200x1200dpi scan quality • Colour touchscreen • USB, Ethernet and Wi-Fi connections • 386x581x467mm • 19.5kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/51488

VERDICT A hefty machine that's great for copying and printing sheets up to A3 size, and can store up to 500 sheets of paper

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE Canon Pixma iX6850 **£180** A cheaper A3 printer, if you don't need the scan and copy functions



SMART SPEAKER | £80 from Minisforum www.snipca.com/51629

Amazon Echo Spot (2024)

Wakey, wakey!



This second generation of Amazon's Echo Spot range incorporates an alarm clock and a smart speaker. It's been a long time coming, though, with seven years separating it from the original.

> "A slick design and cheaper than the original, but it's not as much fun"

There are a handful of changes, but one key difference is that this doesn't have a camera, which was always a slightly odd choice on a device intended for the bedroom, and therefore provides more privacy. Its predecessor also had a large round screen, which took up the whole front of the device and let you set it to display a full analogue clock face.

It still has a basically spherical design with the front section sliced off to create the clock face. The bottom half is now devoted entirely to its speaker, providing better sound than the original, while only the top half is given over to the clock. The screen is rectangular, so doesn't go all the way to the edges of the black semi-circular fascia.

The smaller screen has helped keep the price down. When launched, the original version cost £120, while this model has launched for £40 less. This is arguably still expensive for an alarm clock, and is pricier than the Echo Dot (£55 from www.snipca.com/51633, reviewed in Issue 650) and Echo Pop (£45 from www.snipca.com/51634, reviewed in Issue 664), which have similar smart speaker and alarm-clock functionality. However, those two models lack a display to show you the time at a glance.



Its refreshed design is certainly clean but the screen is missing the vibrant colours and versatility of the original, and is far more limited overall. The viewing angles aren't great when looking at it from the sides, and the fact that the screen doesn't fully occupy the top half of the face feels like you've been cheated. Still, the glossy finish and slick display make for an attractive device.

There are three buttons on top for controlling the volume and switching the microphone on and off (pictured below left), as is standard on most Echo speakers. There's also a pair of microphones to pick up your voice commands.

If you like to hit the snooze button and grab another few minutes of dozing before you get up, you simply tap anywhere on top. there's no need to hit a precise button when you're still half-asleep.

SPECIFICATIONS
1.73in forward-firing mono driver • 2.38in screen • 320x240-pixel resolution • Dual-band Wi-Fi • Bluetooth • 111x113x103mm (HxWxD) • 405g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/51629

VERDICT A sensible upgrade of Amazon's smart speaker/alarm clock, with better sound but limited clock face



ALTERNATIVE Nest Hub £90 For £10 more you can get a Google smart speaker with an interactive touchscreen



CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPECS

USB-C PD



What is it?

Some devices have USB-C ports that have the letters PD next to them, such as the Anker USB-C Hub (£17 from Amazon at www.snipca.com/51638, pictured). PD stands for power delivery and indicates a port that carries power as well as data – and can therefore be used to charge a device.



How does it work?

Not all USB-C ports and cables are the same. The USB-C element actually describes only the type of connector, not the capabilities of the port. Some ports are used for charging a device (such as those on a phone or tablet), while others are designed just for carrying data (such as those that connect a laptop to a monitor). Data-only ports don't need the extra wiring required to carry power.

What are the specs?

Even within the range of USB-C ports that carry power, there are different specifications, with the basic USB-C standard offering up to 100 Watts (W) of power. Phone chargers often deliver less than that and even laptop chargers can fall short of 100W. The PD port of a USB hub may also provide as little as 65W, simply because some of its power will be reserved for other devices attached to it. The only way to be sure of how much power a port can deliver is to check the specification before you buy.

Can I change it later?

No. USB-C ports are permanently installed in devices, and can't be upgraded at a later date.

SECURITY CAMERA | **£110** from Arlo www.snipca.com/51559

Arlo Essential 2K Outdoor Security Camera

Watch this space



The Arlo Essential 2K Outdoor Security Camera is available as a single unit for £110 (see URL above). Alternatively, you can get it in a pack of two (£200 from www.snipca.com/51560) or three (£260 from www.snipca.com/51561).

> "High-quality camera that's easy to set up, install and maintain"

The design hasn't changed much from previous Arlo models. It retains its black plate on the front and the bulbous white casing behind that. It's lightweight and measures just 93x59x53mm (HxWxD), meaning it's small enough to fit just about anywhere. With its IP65-rated weather protection, it'll survive rain and snow, though you can't immerse it in water.

Setup is simple. You carry out the software setup first, which you do via its slick and easy-to-use mobile app. Then, to install the hardware, you simply screw the included mounting bracket into a suitable surface, then attach the moveable ball joint into the threaded hole in the back of the camera. The camera uses batteries and Wi-Fi networking, so there's no other holes to drill or wires to manage, and you don't have to be a DIY expert to get it installed.

The battery is inside the unit, so you will have to unscrew the camera from the ball joint to recharge it, via a USB-C port. Arlo says a full charge should last between four and six months.

Video is recorded at resolutions up to 2560x1440 pixels, with a 130-degree field of view, a motion-detection range of seven metres, a built-in spotlight, two-way audio and an 80-decibel siren for deterring intruders.

The video quality is crisp and clear, and while footage captured at night with the spotlight isn't as sharp as the black-and-white night vision you can fall back on, it still provides sufficient detail.

You can view live video and get basic motion alerts for free, but to save clips to online storage you need a subscription. These start at £4.49 a month and offer extras such as intelligent detection (differentiating between people, pets and vehicles), and the ability to exclude parts of the field of view (such as a busy road) from motion detection. This price rises to £10.99 a month if you have between two and four cameras.

SPECIFICATIONS

2K 2560x1440-pixel resolution • Colour night vision with spotlight; Black-and-white night vision without • 130-degree field of view • Seven-metre spotlight range • Remote-activated siren • Two-way talk • 93x59x53mm (HxWxD) • 203g • One-year warranty
www.snipca.com/51559

VERDICT A high-quality outdoor camera with plenty of configuration options, but some features need a monthly subscription



ALTERNATIVE Ring Spotlight Cam Pro Solar £220 Cut the hassle of having to charge the camera's battery with this solar-powered alternative



WHAT SHOULD I BUY? We solve your buying dilemmas

Can you suggest a basic mobile with good security?

Q I like to use a basic, non-Android/iOS mobile phone, that's easy to use, small and has a long battery life. My problem is that these types of phones, when switched on, aren't very secure. Any person can access their menus and any information stored on it, if the phone is lost or stolen. Are there such phones that provide more security?

David Hawker

A Feature phones (as non-smartphones are called) often don't come with security switched on, but you should be able to put a PIN code lock on your phone to stop anyone else from accessing it.

Nokia phones, for example, are locked when the keyboard is inactive, but all you have to do is press a combination of buttons to activate it. However, you can set up a PIN to lock the device, by going into the menu and choosing Settings, Security, then 'Phone locked'. Enter a new PIN of between four and eight digits. Don't forget it, though, as there's no way of later unlocking the phone without it.

Nokia phones aren't too expensive to buy. For example, the Nokia 110 (pictured) is available from Argos for £40 at www.snipca.com/51562.



Do you need advice on what you should buy? Email us at letters@computeractive.co.uk

BLUETOOTH SPEAKER | **£225** from Amazon www.snipca.com/51541

Ultimate Ears Everboom

Rock garden





The Everboom sits in the middle of Ultimate Ears' portable speaker range, below the party-making Epicboom (£330 from www.snipca.com/51545) and above the smaller-form Megaboom (£170 from Amazon at www.snipca.com/51546). It fits in well, though, with sound that's powerful enough to fill a room, yet it's still small enough to take anywhere.

Like all the best portable devices it's light (just 960g) and has a metal carabiner clip that lets you hook it on to something and hang down. At maximum volume slight distortions start to creep in, and audiophiles will notice that output isn't as expansive as on top-of-the-range speakers, but it's a great option if you like to carry your music from house to garden and beyond. Customise your EQ to suit your surroundings with the Ultimate Ears app. You can party long into the night, too, with a generous battery life of 20 hours.

It's robust and will absorb the odd knock without problem. With its IP67 rating it'll survive a rain shower and dust, and if dropped into a swimming pool it'll happily float on the surface.

One thing it lacks is an auxiliary-in port, so you can't wire it up to serve as a speaker for another player, restricting you to a Bluetooth connection. However, if you play most of your audio content from your phone, whether that's music, radio, audiobooks or podcasts, this solidly built and versatile portable speaker is just the ticket.

SPECIFICATIONS
90dB maximum volume • Bluetooth 5.3 • 20-hours battery life • USB-C charging port • IP67 • 205x110x85mm (HxWxD) • 960g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/51541

VERDICT A handy portable speaker with a 20-hour battery life you can use indoors or out

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE
Soundcore Boom 2 £120
A less powerful, cheaper option that can also be taken outside in all weather



MOUSE | **£70** from Overclockers www.snipca.com/51544

Endgame OP1 8k

Snap judgment



You may not have heard of German peripheral manufacturer Endgame – we've certainly never reviewed any of its products – but this mouse is as good a place to start as any. It's incredibly sensitive, with a maximum polling rate of 8,000Hz, which means it sends positional messages back to your PC 8,000 times a second. And should you feel the need to replace any of its mechanical switches, it's easy to open.

At 51g, it's light, so offers little resistance, and to get that high polling rate it needs to be wired. To make life easier, however, the braided cable is light, flexible and protrudes from the front at a raised angle to reduce drag.

On the downside, we weren't impressed with the feel of the buttons. The mouse clicks aren't as snappy as we'd like, taking too long to rebound – especially when you're playing a game that requires rapid clicking. The side buttons also feel harsh with little dampening, and the scroll wheel's motion is too clunky.

The configuration software is as basic as it gets, though at least it doesn't hog many of your PC's resources. This can be used to adjust several settings, including the polling rate and click latency but it uses too much technical jargon, and you might find yourself having to search online for what these settings do. For example, it uses CPI (counts per inch) rather than the more common DPI (dots per inch) for measuring sensitivity.

SPECIFICATIONS
Wired USB mouse • Six buttons • 26,000 DPI • Braided 180cm cable • Right-handed • 37x61x118mm (HxWxD) • 51g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/51540

VERDICT A decent wired mouse, but the clicks aren't as snappy as they should be

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Logitech Pebble £21
A significantly cheaper wireless mouse, if you just want a controller that's simple and works well



SOUNDBAR | £40 from Amazon www.snipca.com/51578

Saiyin DS6305

Cheap and earful

Computer active RECOMMENDED ★★★★

There are some exceptional smart TVs at low prices around at the moment, but while their screens and choice of built-in streaming services are pretty impressive, they lack sound quality. That's easy to fix with a soundbar, and we've reviewed a few recently, including the Ultimea Nova S50 (£150 from Amazon at www.snipca.com/51457) in Issue 690.

> "A budget speaker to boost the audio output of low-price TVs"

But if you've made savings on your TV you may also baulk at spending £150 on enhancing the sound that comes from it. The Saiyin DS6305 addresses this dilemma, providing a decent, if basic, boost to your TV's sound quality for just £40.

At this price, you can't expect the latest cutting-edge features. There's no spatial audio or dynamic sound formats such as Dolby Atmos or DTS:X. However, we were pleasantly surprised by the overall output, particularly its beefy bass, which makes action scenes more immersive and provides depth to music. Bass wasn't entirely clean or intricately detailed, but it was delivered with a solid amount of power, especially considering the absence of a subwoofer.

Its compromises became more noticeable when we watched a football match because the crowd noise almost drowned out the commentators. When watching videos, TV series or films, we made sure to use the Movie EQ mode – one of the three available options alongside Music and News.

The DS6305 has a black plastic case with a foam cover protecting the speaker – there's no pretence to luxury here, but it isn't unattractive.

There's an LED strip along the base, which fills up to reflect the volume level and changes colour according to the connectivity option used – blue for Bluetooth, green for the auxilliary port or purple for optical input.

It comes with a remote control that requires two AAA batteries (not included), letting you adjust volume, move between EQ modes, and switch between different connection types.

There's no option to connect via HDMI, meaning you won't be able to use your TV remote to control the soundbar's volume. The lack of an HDMI port also means that the easiest possible setup method isn't available, but it was pretty straightforward connecting it to our TV using the included digital optical cable instead.

SPECIFICATIONS

2.0 speaker channels • 1x auxiliary port • 1x digital optical port • Bluetooth • 76x431x97mm (HxWxD) • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/51578

VERDICT Doesn't offer the kind of features of more expensive soundbars, but provides a beefy boost to the audio of budget TVs for a knockdown price

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE Sony HT-S2000 £320 A superior piece of kit that can boost even the most expensive TVs, but you'll need a high budget

DO I REALLY NEED...

A wearable power bank?

What is it?

The Sharge Pouch (£72 from www.snipca.com/51581, pictured) is a power bank with a cable that converts into a shoulder strap, so you can carry it without having to squeeze it into a pocket or bag.

What does it do?

It can charge three mobile devices at the same time from its three USB-C ports and can hold 10,000mAh of charge. When you need to recharge, it can be plugged directly into a wall socket. It comes with adapters for several international plug-socket formats, including the UK.

What's the catch?

Smaller and higher-capacity chargers are available for much less, with typical standard 27,000mAh chargers costing less than £20. They don't have all the extra features but will keep your devices running for longer.

So can I do without it?

Yes. Standard power banks really aren't inconvenient to carry around.

NEXT ISSUE

On Sale Weds 11 Sept

Lenovo LOQ 15in
Portable gaming laptop offers performance boost





CyberPowerPC Infinity X145 Elite
An affordable desktop PC with powerful graphics

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Find out which other products we liked. Buy our 2023 **Back Issue CD**: £18 from **www.snipca.com/48860**



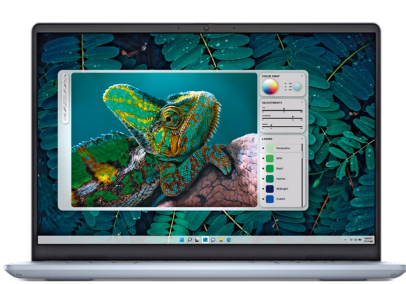


Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

LAPTOP

Dell Inspiron 14 Plus

£1,099 from www.snipca.com/50079
Tested Issue 683



This laptop has the same processor (Intel Core Ultra 7 155H) as our previous favourite (Acer Swift Go 4), but manages to squeeze more speed out of it. It also comes with 16GB RAM, 256GB SSD and a 14in 2240x1400-pixel screen. Excellent value overall.

ALTERNATIVE Acer Swift Go 14 Still a fast and powerful laptop, with a great 14in screen. £1099 from www.snipca.com/49733

DESKTOP PC

Palicomp AMD Cobra

£400 from www.snipca.com/43515
Tested Issue 643



This fast PC is a mouth-watering bargain, with 16GB of RAM, a 2TB SSD and a six-core processor – though it lacks USB-C ports and built-in Wi-Fi.

ALTERNATIVE Wired2Fire Ultima WS Home Office Workstation Blisteringly fast PC, powered by an overclocked eight-core processor and 1TB SSD. £656 from www.snipca.com/41500

APPLE iPAD

Apple iPad 10.2in

£299 from www.snipca.com/48634
Tested Issue 623



The 9th-generation of the basic iPad, released in 2021, is now the best-value Apple tablet. The 2022 version looks better and has a faster processor, but it's not worth paying £130 extra for.

ALTERNATIVE iPad Mini With an even better, but smaller, screen than the 10.2in iPad, the Mini also supports the Pencil and has 64GB of storage. £499 from www.snipca.com/33050

ANDROID TABLET

Samsung Galaxy Tab S9

£799 from www.snipca.com/50039
Tested Issue 667



With a much brighter screen than our previous favourite – the Galaxy Tab S8 – this is perfect for watching TV. It also has a faster processor, so tasks feel smoother, even with several windows open. £799 will get you the 128GB version. If you want 256GB you'll need to spend around £100 more.

ALTERNATIVE Lenovo Tab P11 Pro It's slower than the Tab S9 and the screen is duller, but has a detachable keyboard so you can use it as a laptop. £390 from www.snipca.com/45244

APPLE iPHONE

Apple iPhone 13

£599 from www.snipca.com/43498
Tested Issue 627



Now £200 cheaper than its 2021 launch price, the iPhone 13 has a superb screen, long battery life and an excellent camera – particularly for taking quick snaps without blurring. You could pay £799 for the newer iPhone 15, but we're not convinced it's worth the extra money.

ALTERNATIVE iPhone SE With a single camera and smaller screen but the same powerful A15 processor and 64GB storage as the iPhone 14, it's great value. £429 from www.snipca.com/34773

ANDROID PHONE

Google Pixel 7a

£362 from www.snipca.com/46332
Tested Issue 660



A cheaper version of Google's flagship phone, this uses AI to add clarity to photos, and lasts an impressive 10 hours. Has a fast processor and 8GB RAM to supercharge performance.

ALTERNATIVE Nothing Phone 2a Don't be put off by the odd name. This has a distinctive design, superb camera and decent battery life. From a UK company too. £349 from www.snipca.com/49930

Buy It

Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

MINI PC

Minisforum UM780XTX
£639 from www.snipca.com/48917
Tested Issue 676



This powerful machine currently costs less than the Beelink SER6 Pro, but has twice the memory, twice the storage and a superior processor. These help it run PC tasks faster and handle graphics more smoothly. Ports include USB-C, USB 3.0, HDMI, DisplayPort and Gigabit Ethernet.

ALTERNATIVE Beelink SER6 Pro 7753HS Has 32GB RAM and a 500GB SSD for slick Windows performance. £659 from www.snipca.com/46416

EBOOK READER

Kobo Libra Colour
£199 from www.snipca.com/50192
Tested Issue 683

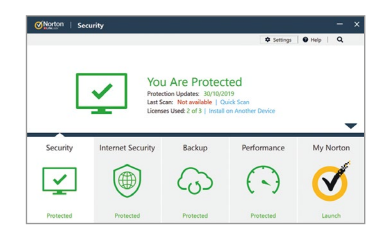


Kobo's first colour e-reader, with an E-Ink Kaleido 3 screen that supports 4,096 tones, making illustrations and photos leap out at you. You can also make notes using a stylus, though that costs £70 extra. It has 32GB storage and Bluetooth for playing audiobooks.

ALTERNATIVE Amazon Kindle This low-cost option is a good choice, especially now it has 16GB of storage. £85 from www.snipca.com/44221

SECURITY SOFTWARE

Norton 360 Premium
£19.99 from www.snipca.com/33247
Tested Issue 629



Norton has always performed strongly in our antivirus tests, regularly making the top three. Owned by US firm NortonLifeLock, it's available at a discount on our Software Store. Use the link above for a 10-device, two-year licence. Other versions are available, including Norton 360 for Gamers.

ALTERNATIVE Bitdefender Total Security Another top performer that we're offering at a discount. £29.99 from www.snipca.com/41141

WEBCAM

Logitech C925e Business Webcam
£58 from www.snipca.com/50751
Tested Issue 608



Despite the name, this webcam is also great for home users. Its standout feature is automatically adjusting itself to keep your picture looking sharp. It offers a 78-degree field of view, which is fine for everyday video chats with one person in front of the camera.

ALTERNATIVE Creative Live Cam Sync 4K Affordable 4K webcam with high-quality video and captures voice from a distance. £38 from www.snipca.com/51577

PC MONITOR

BenQ BL2790QT
£175 from www.snipca.com/51568
Tested Issue 685



With a 1440p resolution on a 27in screen, this has a pixel density of 109 pixels per inch, making it extremely sharp. Also has great speakers, lots of controls and plenty of ports. It's the best balance between size, resolution, quality and price.

ALTERNATIVE Asus ROG Strix XG27ACS Another excellent 27in monitor with 1440p resolution, with a fast refresh rate aimed at gamers. £260 from www.snipca.com/49898

SOLID-STATE DRIVE

Corsair MP600 Pro LPX 500GB
£67 from www.snipca.com/41547
Tested Issue 630



In our tests, this M.2 SSD hit speeds of 7,364MB/s and 6,870MB/s when reading and writing data – astonishingly fast scores. It's compatible with the new PCIe 4.0 standard, which is twice as fast as PCIe 3.0. The 1TB model costs £99; 2TB costs £195.

ALTERNATIVE Crucial MX500 500GB As fast as an SSD can get in the traditional 2.5in SATA format, this is a great-value upgrade. £45 from www.snipca.com/37304

COMPETITION

Win 1 of 3
QDOS SnapStand wireless 3-in-1 Apple chargers

Made from 60-per-cent recycled materials, the space-grey SnapStand from QDOS sets a new standard in sustainability while charging your Apple products. Its three charge points mean it can power an iPhone, an Apple Watch and AirPods simultaneously.

It can fully charge an iPhone 15 Pro Max in three hours 30 minutes using 15W Qi Wireless Output, while an Apple Watch S9 takes three hours using 2.5W Qi Wireless Output. AirPods are powered using 5W Qi Wireless Output.

Crafted with precision and care, it aligns effortlessly with Apple MagSafe devices and folds for charging on the go. Its adaptable design ensures optimal viewing angles for videos, calls and calendar browsing, enhanced by a handy blue and red LED indicator. It also activates iOS 17 nightstand mode when your iPhone is rotated at 90 degrees.

To enter this competition, answer the question at www.snipca.com/51593 and submit your details by midnight Tuesday 10 September. Good luck!

You can buy the **QDOS SnapStand 3-in-1 charger** for £79.99 from www.snipca.com/51632. For more information on QDOS products, including chargers, phone cases, cables and adapters, visit www.qdossound.com.

PRINTER

PRICE DROP

Epson EcoTank ET-2830

£180 from www.snipca.com/51715
Tested Issue 676



This replaces the ET-1810 as our favourite printer because it adds copying and scanning to its functions for only £20 more. Print quality is great, especially for photos, which have crisp details, vivid colours and realistic skin tones.

ALTERNATIVE Epson EcoTank ET-1810
Not the fastest printer, but comes with enough ink for 4,500 mono and 7,500 colour pages. £160 from www.snipca.com/49863

SMART TV

Samsung Q60B

£490 from www.snipca.com/51020
Tested Issue 652



With our former favourite – the TCL 55RP620K – out of stock, Samsung's 43in set is our new pick. It has excellent colour reproduction in well-lit scenes, and the picture is wonderfully sharp, especially in 4K.

ALTERNATIVE LG OLED42C3
LG's 42in TV is more than double the price, but unlike TCL's model it has an OLED screen, boosting picture quality considerably. £829 from www.snipca.com/47271

ROUTER

Asus RT-AXE7800

£226 from www.snipca.com/47586
Tested Issue 665



This router has Wi-Fi 6E, so will be capable of the fastest possible speeds on the 6GHz network over the next few years. It has five Ethernet ports and also a USB 3.0 port to connect a hard drive or NAS drive.

ALTERNATIVE Synology WRX560
Our previous favourite remains an excellent choice, delivering speeds of up to 791.5Mbps. Add more units to set up mesh Wi-Fi. £226 from www.snipca.com/49161

Workshops & Tips

Pull Out & Keep
Issue 691

14 pages of easy-to-follow workshops and expert tips

HOW TO...

Convert and edit the perfect video

by Nik Rawlinson

What you need: Any Video Converter **Time required:** One hour

Shooting videos is far easier than editing them. But edit them you must. Your audience won't want to sit through several minutes of surplus footage, waiting for the few seconds that are actually worth watching.

The simplest way is to edit your footage on your phone – assuming that's where you shot it. Issue 689's Cover Feature revealed the best apps for doing this (buy the back issue from www.snipca.com/48860). But that's a rather simplistic option. While it's a great way to cut flab from your raw footage, it's not so easy to combine multiple videos into a single file. If you want to share a series of events, you'll need to play or send several separate files and hope that whoever you share them with doesn't get tired of tapping between them.

For more sophisticated editing, you'll need to use a PC program like Any Video Converter (AVC), which strikes the right balance between range of features and ease of use. Now is the perfect time to try AVC because version 9.0, which launched in June, moves all the editing tools into one screen. Prior to this, AVC had been a little fiddly.

Here, we'll explain how to use it to import, edit and share snappier and more compelling videos with your family and friends.

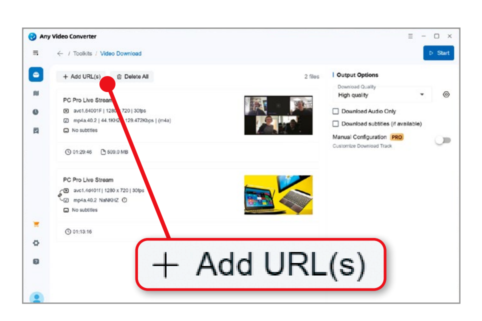
1 Import your video files

To get started, visit www.snipca.com/51380 and click the red Download button – with the Windows logo – in the Any Video Converter box.

We're going to work with some video files that we shot on our phone and transferred to our PC. However, before we get started on those we'll explain how you can use AVC to download video from the web. This could come in handy if you've previously uploaded your video to YouTube, say, and want to retrieve it at a later date.

Press Ctrl+L to select the stream's address (to remember this shortcut, imagine that the L stands for 'link' or 'location'), then press Ctrl+C to copy the address to your clipboard. Now switch to AVC and click the red Video Download button at the top of the home screen.

Click '+ Add URL(s)', then click in the box and paste the link you copied. Click 'Analysis' and AVC will look up the video, detect the format and calculate how long it will take to download. Rather than immediately downloading that stream, let's add another one to the queue. Return to your video and again press Ctrl+L, then Ctrl+C to select and copy the link. Switch back to AVC and click '+ Add URL(s)' – which now appears at the top of the interface (see screenshot left) – and press Ctrl+V to paste the address into the box that appears. When you've added all the videos you want to download, click the blue Start button.



Any Video Converter lets you queue multiple videos to download in sequence

2 Convert your videos

While downloading online videos is useful, AVC's main purpose is converting videos from one format to another. This can be useful when you want to save video for use on a particular device that doesn't support



its existing format, or when you want to shrink videos so they take up less space on your drive.

If space saving is your intention, bear in mind that this is almost always achieved either by reducing the resolution, or by compressing (removing data from) the video file. Neither can be undone if you save the resulting file on top of the original, so, if you suspect you might one day want to view or work with the original full-quality video again, save a copy of it on an external drive or by burning it to a disc.

Once you've done that, return to AVC's home screen and click Format Convert. It will immediately display the file-selection box. Navigate to the videos you want to convert and select them, then click Open. Remember, if you want to select several files that are next to each other in the file list, click the first, then hold down the Shift key while clicking the last to select them both, plus everything between. To select non-adjacent files, hold Ctrl while clicking each one.

Now use the settings in the Output Options sidebar to specify how the files should be reformatted. For example, select 'WebM Movie (*.webm)' in the Format dropdown menu (**1** in our screenshot below), and Auto in the Quality menu **2**, but leave Video Resolution at 100% **3** to avoid changing the size of each frame. Now click the FPS (frames per second) menu and select 24 **4**, then click the Audio Bitrate menu and select '96 kbps' **5**. Finally, click Channels and select 1 **6** to convert each video to mono.

How I work with video



Whenever I transfer videos to my computer, I prefer to use something simple like Any Video Converter. My goal is always to create something quickly, which nonetheless looks neat and tidy, so I can share it online, or send it to friends and family. AVC means I don't need to spend thousands on a professional editing suite to do that.

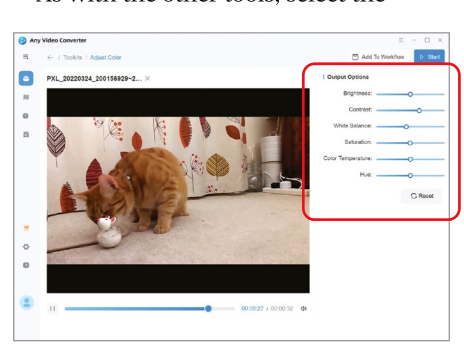
Nik Rawlinson

How do you edit your video files?
Please let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

3 Set the same colour balance

If you're working with video from several sources, they might not all have the same colour balance (some may be redder or bluer) while others might be brighter or darker. Your finished video will be less jarring if you try to give all of your clips a similar appearance using the Adjust Color control, which you'll find on the home screen.

As with the other tools, select the clip you want to work with, then use the sliders in the sidebar to make your changes (see screenshot below left). You can preview the result by playing back the video in the window beside the sliders. When you're happy with what you've achieved, click Start to process the clip.



Adjust these sliders to give multiple videos the same colour balance

4 Trim your videos

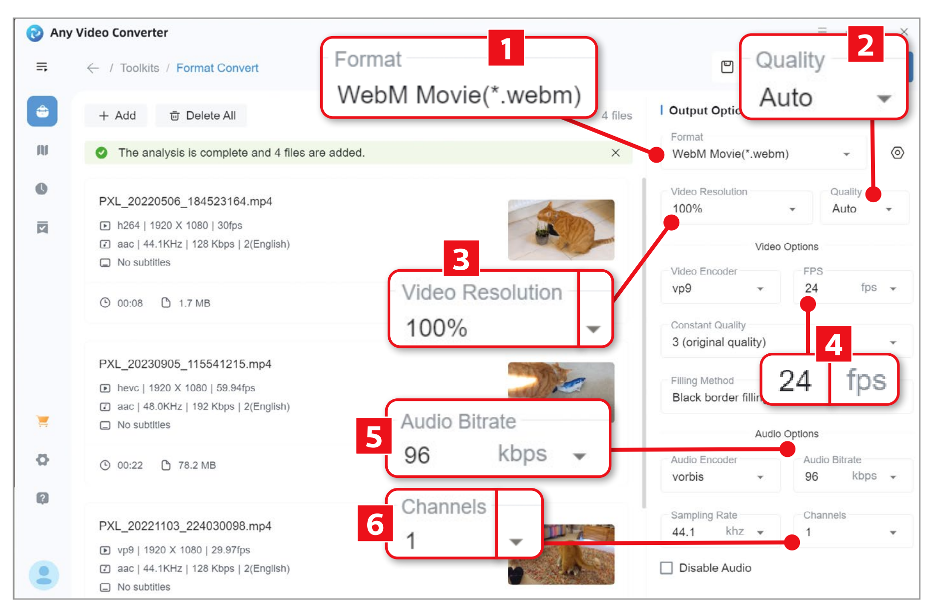
Once you've gathered all the videos you want to work with, you should trim them to focus on just the relevant sections. That way, when you compile them into your finished movie, every shot should hold your audience's attention.

Return to AVC's home screen then click the purple Trim Video button to open File Explorer. Now select and open the first video you want to trim. Editing works with what's known as 'in' and 'out' points. The first of these is used to define the start of a clip, and the latter marks the end. If you want to clip (and keep) several sections from a single video, you can set multiple in and out points. AVC will create a video for each of them.

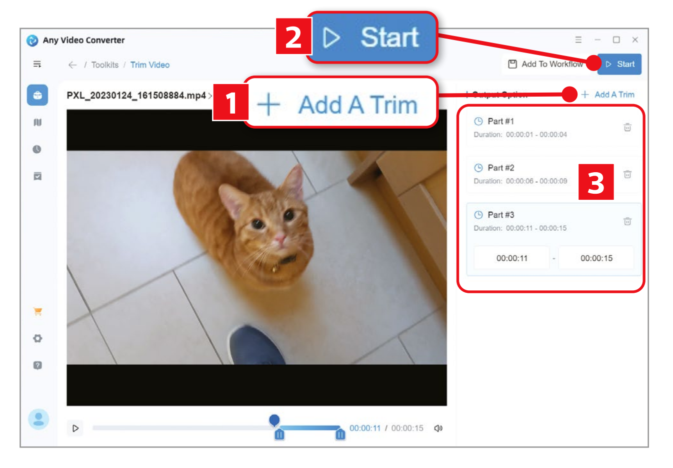
Start by playing your video through from beginning to end so you get a good idea of the running order, then return to the beginning and drag the left-most handle, below the progress bar, until it sits just before the start of the first section you want to keep. You've just set your 'in' point.

Now do the same with the handle at the furthest end of the progress bar until it sits just after the end of the section you want to keep. This is your 'out' point. Notice how a new numbered 'Part' is added to the Output Option sidebar, complete with the time at which it begins and ends.

If you only want to clip one section from your video, you can click Start now. However, if you want to keep several



Open AVC's Output Options to change the format of the videos you're converting



Define the start and end of each section you want to keep

Click the square between each thumbnail image then select your transition

sections, instead click '+ Add A Trim' (1 in our screenshot above) and repeat the process for the second section, third, and so on, until you've defined all the sections you want to keep. At that point press Start 2. As you can see from the screenshot, we've selected three sections of the video that we want to save as individual files 3.

When it's finished trimming each video, AVC saves them in a folder within your Documents folder. Inside this, you'll find a folder called Trim Video that contains a sub-folder with the same name as your original video file. This contains the clips you just created.

5 Merge multiple clips

Now that you've trimmed your videos to just the best bits, it's time to edit them to create your finished movie. Return to the program's home screen and click Merge Video.

Although the Merge Video button suggests you can only join two clips, you can actually carry on adding clips until you've assembled the finished product. Use the File Explorer window that automatically opens to navigate to the first folder containing your trimmed clips – as mentioned you'll find this inside the Trim Video folder, inside AVC's own sub-folder of your Documents library. Select all the clips, then click Open. After a few seconds of analysing the contents, AVC will add them to your timeline.

If you need to add other clips that weren't in that folder, or any of your unedited footage, click the '+' on the timeline after the last of your existing clips, then repeat the process of navigating to the folder containing the video files you want to use and opening them.

Be aware that although AVC doesn't limit how many clips you add to the timeline, you'll need to upgrade to the Pro version before compiling the finished movie if you add more than five (see screenshot below). This costs $9.95 (about £7.70) a month, $29.95 a year, or $49.95 for life (at the time of writing that price includes a $30 discount on the regular price of $79.95).

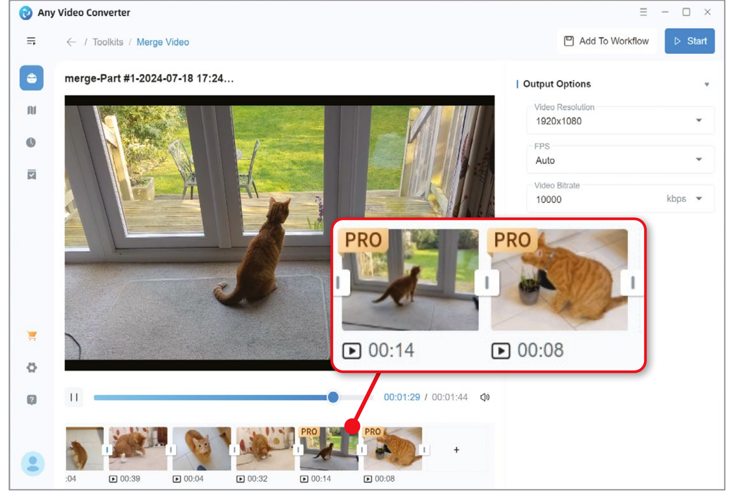
You could get around this by compiling multiple videos, each of which comprises five clips. You'd then be able to add five of your compiled movies to a timeline and save them as a single movie, which would effectively comprise 25 clips.

Do be careful, though, as every time a video-editing program saves a video, the quality will be slightly below that of the original. It means embedding clips within clips within clips this way could result in something that's not quite as clear as you would like.

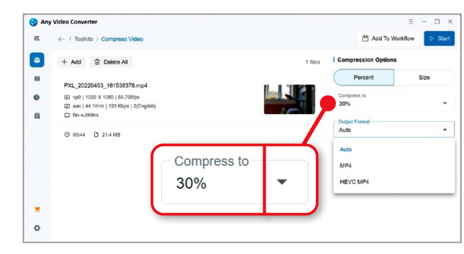
If you didn't add your clips to the timeline in the order they should appear, simply click and hold on them, then drag them left or right into their new positions. By default, at the end of each clip, your video will cut straight to the next, as is common on TV. If you'd prefer to use a transition like a dissolve or fade, click the little square that sits between each thumbnail (1 in our screenshot above) and choose your preferred transition for that point from the gallery of options 2.

When you've assembled your clips in the correct order and specified your transitions, click Start to save the compiled video. It will again be saved in the AVC folder, inside your Documents library, in a Merge Video sub-folder.

If you want to email your video, you might want to compress it so it's quicker to send. Click 'Compress Video' on the AVC home screen, then select a compression level. As you can see from our screenshot below, we're allowing AVC to select the output format itself, but have told it to compress the video to just 30 per cent of its original size.



Upgrade to the Pro version if you want to include more than five clips in your video



Compress your video if you want to email it to someone

Secure your passwords with Microsoft Authenticator

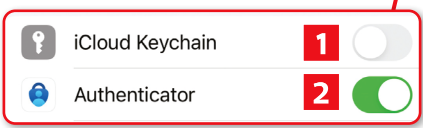
What you need: Microsoft Authenticator
Time required: 20 minutes

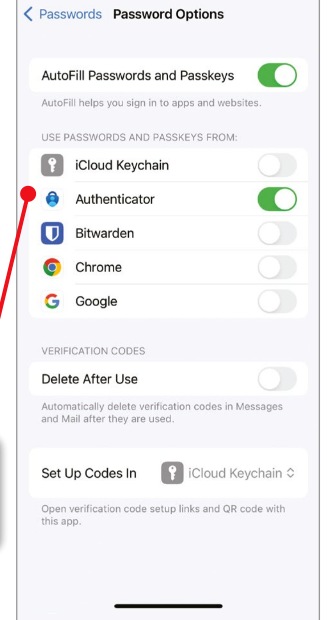


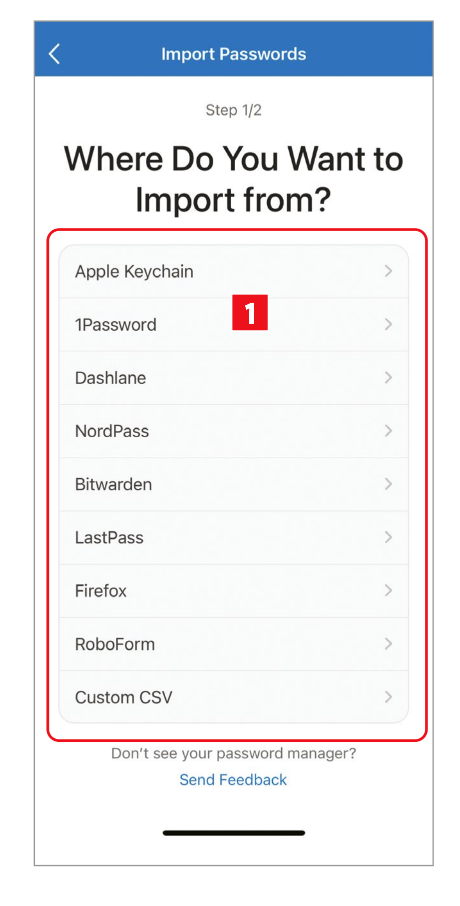
Microsoft's Authenticator app is best known for saving and generating ever-changing security codes that you use to verify your identity when logging into an account protected by two-factor authentication. However, it has another trick up its sleeve: it can also store passwords and automatically fill them in when websites request them. Merging these two features makes a lot of sense because it means you only need one app to satisfy all your online security needs. It's a free download for Android (www.snipca.com/51573) and iOS (www.snipca.com/51575). Here, we'll show you how to set it up and use it to keep your accounts safe.

STEP 1 After downloading the app, follow the onscreen setup instructions. Then, tap 'Sign in with Microsoft' 1 and log in using your Microsoft account details. If you don't have a Microsoft account, scroll to the bottom of the page at www.snipca.com/51567 and click 'Create an account'.

STEP 2 You now need to allow Authenticator to fill in password fields for you. On iOS, open Settings, tap Passwords, followed by Password Options, then switch on the slider next to Authenticator 1. If the slider beside iCloud Keychain is turned on, turn it off 2 so Microsoft Authenticator is your default password manager. On Android, tap 'Allow autofill' in the Authenticator app, then select Authenticator and when prompted to 'Make sure that you trust this app', tap OK. Now tap Finish on iOS or Done on Android.

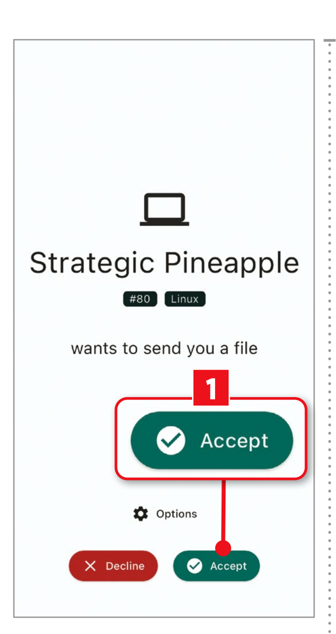




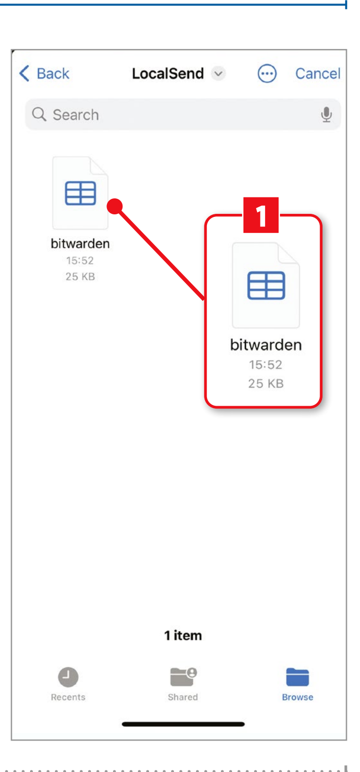


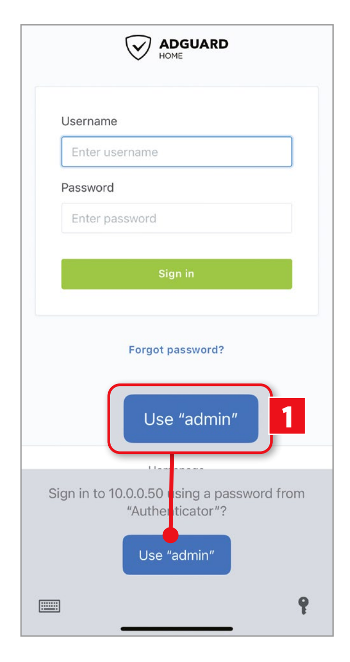
STEP 3 If you already have passwords stored in another password manager or browser, you should import them to Microsoft Authenticator so it can fill them in for you. Tap the Passwords button at the bottom and, on Android, tap Try Now at the top, where it offers to import your existing credentials. On iPhone, tap the three-line menu beside the Passwords heading, followed by Settings, then Import Passwords. On either platform, tap 'Import from Password Managers', then tap the password manager you currently use 1. Tap the link it displays to see instructions for exporting your passwords. This will vary for each manager.

STEP 4 Some password managers only let you export their contents via a browser or desktop software. Bitwarden, 1Password, LastPass and Dashlane fall into this category. So, you'll need to transfer the exported password file from your PC to your phone. You could do this by email but be very careful to double-check you use the correct email address or you risk sending all your passwords to someone else. Instead, we'd recommend using LocalSend (https://localsend.org) – see our Workshop in Issue 673 (page 38) explaining how to set up and use this. After sending the passwords file from your PC, tap Accept **1** in the LocalSend app on your phone.

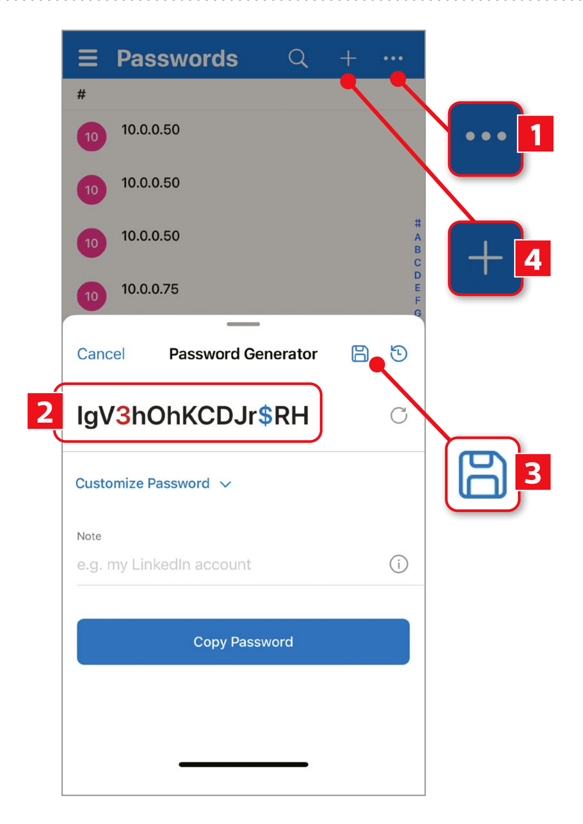


STEP 5 On iOS, LocalSend will save your file to a LocalSend folder in your phone's Files app. On Android, it will save it to the Downloads folder. If you transferred it by email, tap the attachment and save it to your phone's internal storage. Return to the Authenticator app and tap Select CSV File. Now, on either iPhone or Android, tap the folder containing the exported file, then tap the file **1**. Its contents will now be imported into Authenticator. The app will tell you how many passwords it has imported and warn you if any failed to export. Close the message box then delete the exported file so no one else can access your passwords.





STEP 6 The next time you need to sign into a website with a previously saved password, visit it in your browser and tap inside the username field. Your phone will compare the site's address with the list of passwords stored in Authenticator and, if it finds a match, will display a button with the matching username **1**. Tap this and Authenticator will fill in the form for you. If it fails to find a match, enter the username and password so it will fill them in next time. Long-press in the address bar and copy the login page's address, then switch to the Authenticator app.



STEP 7 Tap Passwords on the bottom bar, then, if you're setting up a new login for an account that doesn't exist yet, tap the three dots at the top of the screen **1** and select Password Generator. Authenticator will create a complex password **2**, which you can save by tapping the disk icon at the top of the Generator pane **3**. This takes you to the Add Password screen. If you're not setting up a new account – just saving a password that's not in your list, tap the '+' **4** instead of the three dots to get to this screen. Next, tap on the Website line and paste the web address you copied in Step 6, then tap the Username line below it and type the username (or email address) you use for logging into that site. Tap Save.

Readers' Tips

TIP OF THE FORTNIGHT

Add location labels to photos using What3Words

Following your news story on emergency services encouraging the public to use What3Words (Issue 689, page 7), I discovered you can also use it to remember the precise location of a photo you've taken on your phone. It's a great way of revisiting the same spot in future.

Open the What3Words app (www.snipca.com/51420) on your phone or tablet, then tap the top-left menu (three horizontal lines). Now tap 'Photo mode', then tap OK and take your photo. Next, tap the 'current location' button and What3Words will show you the three random words linked to that exact spot. Now tap Continue and you'll see the photo with a label at the bottom left showing the three-word code (1 in our screenshot).

You can move this anywhere using your finger, and change its colour and style using the icons on the right 2. There are also options for downloading and sharing it.

Duncan Matthews



Duncan wins a copy of our 2023 Back Issue CD **Buy it from us at www.snipca.com/48860**

SOFTWARE

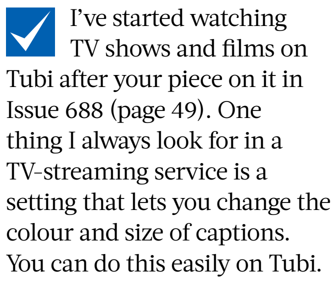
Increase font size of USB Device Tree Viewer

I've always found it hard to make sense of programs that show what's connected to your PC, and at first USB Device Tree Viewer was no different. I installed it after you recommended version 4.3 in Issue 687 (page 19), but found the font style and size hard to read.

But unlike similar programs that have frustrated me, USB Device Tree Viewer has settings that let you increase the size of text and change the font. You'll see these near the bottom of the menu when you click Options. It lets you set one style for the left pane, and one for the right – though there are more font choices for the former.

I've used it to select the font Segoe Fluent Icons, size 18, on the left, and Consolas, size 12, on the right (see screenshot left). It does mean I have to scroll right to see all the details, but this is better than having to squint at tiny text.

Joe Crenshaw



STREAMING

Tweak your captions on Tubi

I've started watching TV shows and films on Tubi after your piece on it in Issue 688 (page 49). One thing I always look for in a TV-streaming service is a setting that lets you change the colour and size of captions.

You can do this easily on Tubi. If watching online, visit www.snipca.com/51458 and set your preference.

There are more options on the phone/tablet app though (Android www.snipca.com/51187; iOS www.snipca.com/51188). On Android for example, tap the subtitles icon (speech bubble) at the top once you've started watching, then tap Advanced Settings at the bottom right.

Why I stopped using...

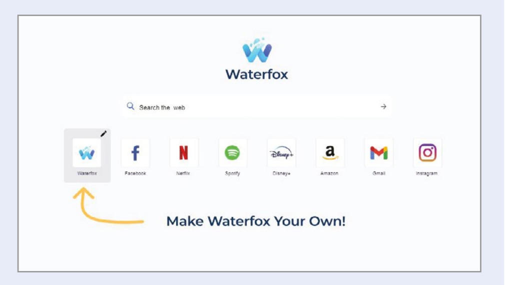
Brave

A few months ago I followed your advice and switched to Brave as my main browser. It's impressively secure, but even its normal security settings break some websites. For example, the Met Office site does not work properly, probably because of its complex cookies, and one of my bank's login screens shows an error.

And what I use instead...

For a second browser to run alongside Brave, I recommend **Firefox**, or one of its more secure forks: Waterfox (www.waterfox.net, pictured) or LibreWolf (www.librewolf.net). If you choose Firefox or Waterfox, you can make them more private by following Mozilla's instructions at www.snipca.com/51447.

In Firefox, you'll also need to turn off Telemetry in Settings, 'Privacy & Security'. LibreWolf is secure 'out of the box' and comes with the ad blocker uBlock Origin. Its disadvantage is that you have to update it manually. And like Waterfox it's not available on mobile devices.



Anthony Sheppard

Tell us why you stopped using a website, app or program: letters@computeractive.co.uk

Turn on the 'Show captions' slider, then tap 'Caption size and style' to see your options.

You'll now see standard styles like white or yellow on black, but if you tap Customise at the bottom right you can make your own. You've got more text colours to choose from, as well as different fonts and other design tweaks, like changing the colour of the subtitle box. Every time you make a change, you'll see a preview above – as our screenshot below left shows. This means it's easy to experiment with styles until you find one that suit you.

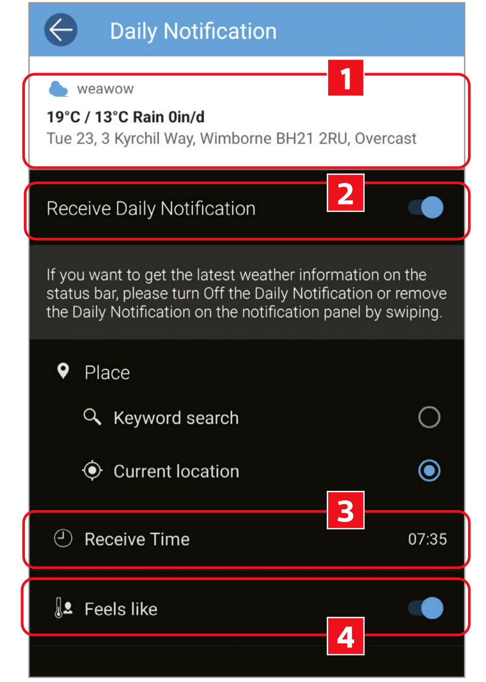
Andrew Pollack

APPS

Get daily weather notifications from Weawow

Like Paul Burrows ('Tip of the Fortnight', Issue 689), I'm a big fan of the outstanding weather app Weawow (Android www.snipca.com/51027; iOS www.snipca.com/51028). I've bookmarked several cities, as he suggested.

I've also turned on the daily notification to get a quick weather bulletin in the morning. To do so, tap the menu button top left (three horizontal lines), then Settings, followed by Daily Notification. You'll see an example of a notification at the top (1 in our screenshot below). To see this, you have to tap the Receive Daily Notification slider so it turns blue 2. You also need to set a time to receive the alert 3, and I like that it gives you the option to show a 'feels like' temperature 4.



Reader recommends...

TP-Link 4G M7350 MiFi travel hotspot

£65 from Amazon www.snipca.com/51448



My wife and I have just returned from a six-week jaunt along the south coast of England in our trusty camper van. For company we had our pet spaniel Toby and this TP-Link M7350 travel router (pictured), which kept us connected to the web via 4G most of the time.

I bought it late last year in preparation for the trip, having read your extensive instructions in Issue 663's How To (page 35). Setting up with an EE SIM card was fast, and the connection was reliable enough for watching videos on tablets and laptops.

When I wanted to check how much data we'd used, it was easy to open the control panel and see this information. It's handy that you can set it to warn you when you've hit a certain percentage of used data.

It was also fast to charge, and fits comfortably into my pocket. I've been delighted by the purchase. It'll definitely accompany us on our next road trip.

Ted Callaghan

Want to recommend hardware or software to fellow readers? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk

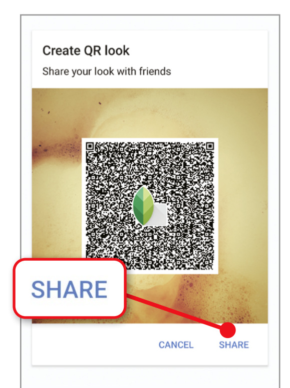
When the notification appears, you simply tap it to open the app for a more detailed forecast of that day's weather.

Charles Mitchell

APPS

Share photo-editing presets using QR codes

One of the best things about the photo-editing app Snapseed (Android www.snipca.com/51311; iOS www.snipca.com/51312), which you recommended in Issue 689's Cover Feature, is the option to create a QR code that saves the specific edits you've made to a photo. You can then share this with others, letting them apply the same edits with a single tap.



This is how it works in Android. Finish editing your image, then tap the 'Undo' icon at the top, followed by 'QR look' in the menu that pops up. Now tap 'Create QR look' followed by Share (see screenshot above), then send it to someone by email, text message or WhatsApp.

The recipient now needs to open a photo in Snapseed, then tap the Undo icon, followed by 'QR look', then 'Scan QR look'. They then need to scan the QR code, and the photo will appear with the edits applied. You can also save these codes yourself for applying instant edits later.

Gerald Eastman

WINDOWS

Save files in Storage Spaces

In Issue 688 (page 69), you say it's prudent to save files on an external hard drive, but that you should also consider using a second drive – kept 'offsite' in a separate location. I realise this isn't the same as offsite storage, but I prefer to use Microsoft's Storage Spaces tool to save files.

In File Explorer on my laptop I can see a 5TB drive G. This is actually three 4TB drives configured as 5TB of mirrored (dual copy) storage. When I change or add a file on drive G, it's spread across these three drives.

It hasn't happened yet, but if one of the three drives failed I think I'd receive a frantic message saying that my storage is only single copied, and that I should add another drive. This would be followed by a 'Mirrored storage now rebuilt' message after I've plugged in a new drive.

Simon Davies

Browser Tips

CHROME
Search for info about content using Google Lens

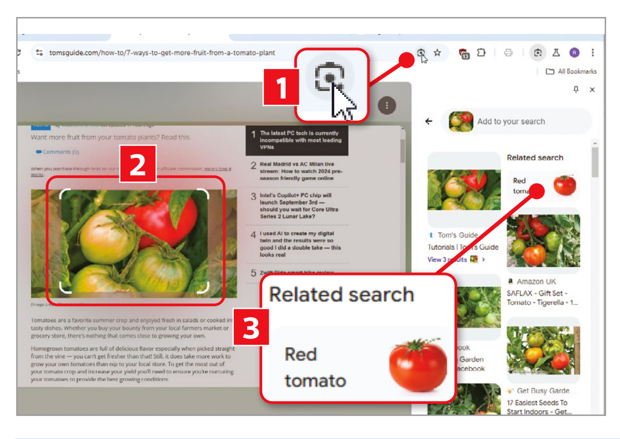
Chrome 128, released in August, introduces a useful new feature – the first one the browser has added for a long time – called 'Search with Google Lens'. This lets you look up information about images, videos and other content on web pages, without typing anything. Instead it captures a screenshot of the element you select and sends it to Google to perform an image search.

To try this new feature, either click the 'Search with Google Lens' button at the end of Chrome's address bar (1 in our screenshot below), or – if you don't see this icon – click the three-dot menu button and choose 'Search with Google Lens'. You can also access the option by right-clicking the page, dragging the cursor and then releasing your mouse button.

Click 'Continue' in the pop-up that appears, then drag your cursor over the image, video or other content you want more information about 2. Google Lens will send a screenshot to Google, which will use it to search the web, then display 'visual matches', related searches and links to relevant pages in Chrome's side panel 3.

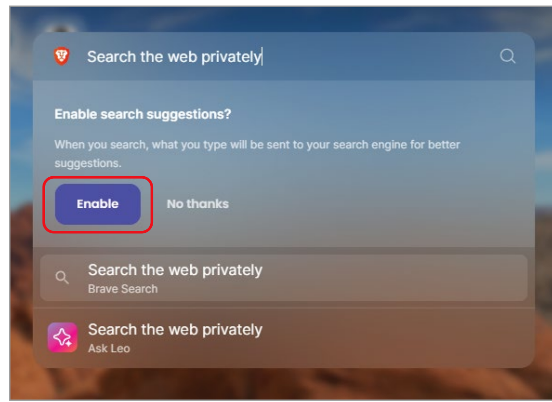
This should allow you to identify the subject of the selected content, and quickly look up further details. Click the cross icon top right or press the Esc key to close the side panel and return to standard browsing.

'Search with Google Lens' is similar to the 'Circle to Search' option that's now available in the Google app on many Android phones. This lets you search for content by circling or scribbling on it with your finger (www.snipca.com/51579).



BRAVE
Search the web privately from your New Tab page

Brave launched its privacy-focused search engine, Brave Search, in 2021 and – unsurprisingly – made it the default search engine in its browser. This means any search queries you type into Brave's address bar are automatically handled by Brave Search.



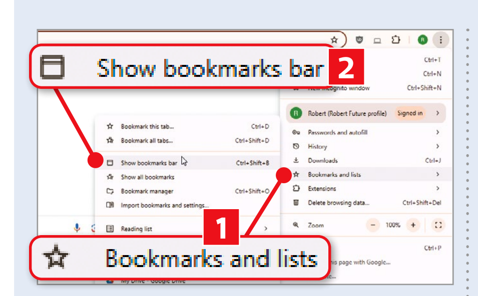
Unlike Google and Bing, Brave Search doesn't store details of your searches, share them with advertisers or use secret algorithms to manipulate its results. To make it even easier to access the search engine, Brave 1.68.128 – released in late July – adds a Brave Search widget to the browser's New Tab page.

Type a search query into the 'Search the web privately' box and press Enter to open the results in Brave Search. You can optionally click Enable (see screenshot above) to show search suggestions as you type – or 'No thanks' to decline them – and switch your search to Brave's AI assistant, Leo. This shows a response in the browser's sidebar and works best when asking Leo a question.

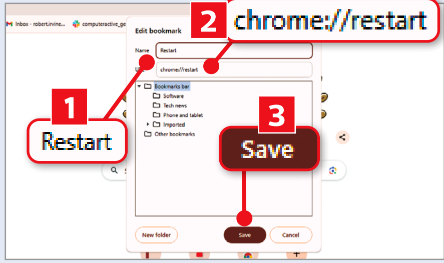
The new widget lets you search privately with Brave Search, without first visiting its website, even if it's not set as your default search engine. If you'd prefer

WORKSHOP Add a Restart button to Chrome

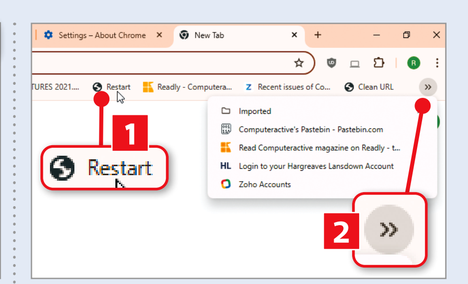
Chrome only provides a Relaunch option when you update the browser or enable a hidden experiment. This is annoying when you need to quickly restart it, because – for example – it's using too much memory. Here's how to add a one-click Restart button to Chrome.



1 First, make sure Chrome's bookmarks bar is displayed. Click the three-dot menu button in the top-right corner and choose 'Bookmarks and lists' 1 then 'Show bookmarks bar' 2. You can also press Ctrl+Shift+B to show and hide the bar.



2 Right-click the bookmarks bar and select 'Add page' to open an 'Edit bookmark' window. In the Name box, type Restart 1 or Relaunch, and in the URL box type chrome://restart 2. Click the Save button 3 to confirm.



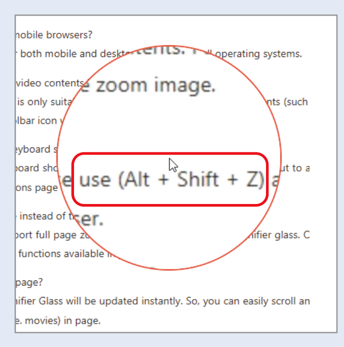
3 A 'Restart' or 'Relaunch' button will now be added to Chrome's bookmarks bar 1. If you can't see it, click the double-arrow button 2 to show the overflow menu and drag the option to the main bar. Click the button to restart the browser.

BEST EXTENSION FOR... Magnifying content on web pages

Magnifying Glass
Chromium
www.snipca.com/51583
Firefox
www.snipca.com/51584

When text on a web page is too small to read, you can increase the zoom level in your browser to enlarge it. However, this affects all the content on the page, which can feel like you're shouted at.

Magnifying Glass adopts a more focused approach by enlarging only specific areas. Click the extension's toolbar button, or press Alt+Shift+Z, to open the magnifying glass, then drag the circle over the text (see screenshot), image, video or other content you want to zoom. Click anywhere on the page to hide the glass.



Magnifying Glass' default magnification level is 2x, but you can change this in the extension's Options, along with the 'capture area' of the circle and the colour of its border.

If you don't like that, try...

Lensify
Chromium
www.snipca.com/51585

Lensify makes it easy to adjust magnification strength and size, but it's not as fast and light as Magnifying Glass.

not to have it on your New Tab page, hover your cursor over the search box, click the three-dot icon that appears and choose Hide Search.

FIREFOX
Customise how text is displayed in Reader View

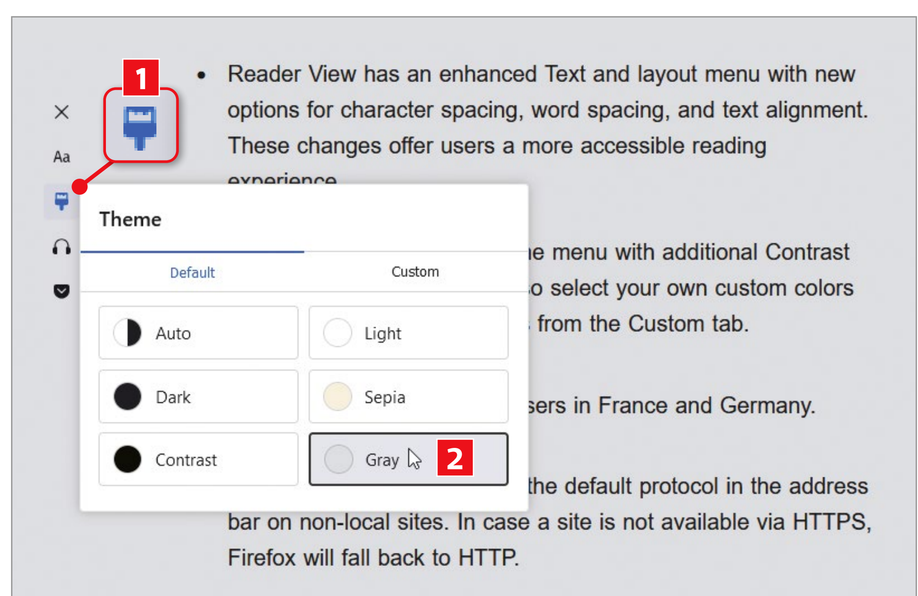
All the main web browsers include a reading mode that removes all the clutter from web pages so you can focus on the core text. In Firefox, this is called Reader View and version 129 of the browser – released 6 August – adds some useful customisation options that make text even easier to read.

To switch to Reader View when you're viewing an online article, either click the 'Toggle reader view' button at the end of Firefox's address bar or press F9 on your keyboard. This will reload the page with everything but the text removed.

On the left-hand side of the page, you'll see an expanded panel of options. Click the 'Text and layout' (Aa) button, then the arrow next to Advanced to reveal the new additions.

Drag the slider for 'Character spacing' to increase the space between characters, and the slider for 'Word spacing' to widen the space between words. Use the 'Text alignment' options to make the text left- or right-justified, or centred on the simplified page.

Click the Theme (paintbrush) button (1 in our screenshot below) to apply Reader View's new Contrast theme, which is a sharper version of dark mode, or the new Gray theme 2, which displays black text on a light-grey background. The new Custom tab lets you customise the colours of the text, background and links when you open pages in Reader View.



CHROMIUM
Collect different buttons from websites

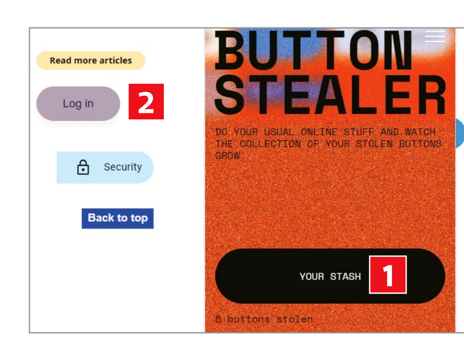


As we explained in Issue 690 (pages 6 and 42), many useful Chrome extensions will soon be disabled in the browser, due to Google's new Manifest V3 system. That's depressing news for extension fans, so we're pleased that developers are still coming up with fun new ideas for add-ons.

One of the quirkiest we've seen is Button Stealer (www.snipca.com/51582), which – as its name suggests – lets you 'steal' buttons from websites you visit. These may include buttons to 'Log in', 'Learn more', 'Get started' and other options you see and click every day.

Click the extension's toolbar button then Your Stash (1 in our screenshot below) to browse all the buttons you've amassed 2. And don't worry – it only collects the actual button images, not any personal data.

Button Stealer has no practical purpose, but it's interesting to see how many buttons you can nab, in different colours, shapes and sizes. And yes, it is compatible with Manifest V3.



ANDROID & iOS

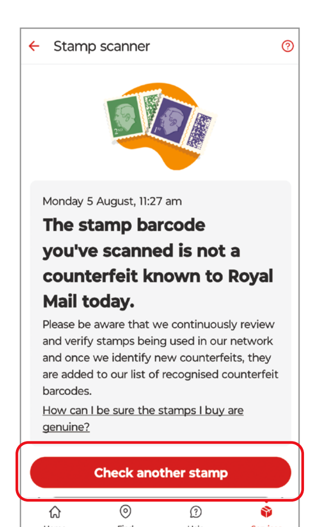
Identify fake stamps using the Royal Mail app

Since Royal Mail switched to using stamps with barcodes, there has been a rise in the number of counterfeit stamps being circulated in the UK. Some people who received letters carrying these fake stamps were charged £5 by Royal Mail – though it suspended 'fines' in April.

To help you avoid using fakes, Royal Mail has added a stamp-barcode scanner to its free app for Android (www.snipca.com/51630) and iOS (www.snipca.com/51631).

Launch the app, sign into your Royal Mail account and tap the Services tab at the bottom. Swipe down the Stamps section and select the new 'Counterfeit stamp scanner' option. Press 'Continue', grant the Royal Mail app permission to use your phone's camera, then scan the barcode on a stamp.

The app will then tell you if the barcode you've scanned is known to be a counterfeit. Tap 'Check another stamp' (see screenshot right) to scan a different one.



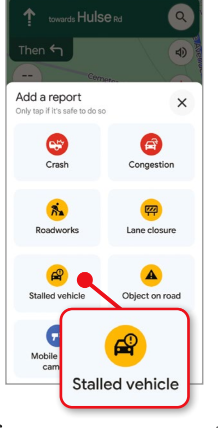
Royal Mail says it's continuously reviewing and verifying stamps to keep its list of fakes up to date. It recommends you only buy stamps from Post Office branches, reputable high-street retailers and its own website.

ANDROID & iOS

Report traffic incidents to other Google Maps users

The latest update to the Google Maps app for Android (www.snipca.com/51635) and iOS (www.snipca.com/51636) incorporates a feature long available in its fellow, Google-owned navigation app Waze (www.waze.com). This lets you report details of traffic accidents, congestion, roadworks and other incidents and obstacles, for the benefit of other drivers.

When you're using Google Maps to follow a route, and the traffic comes to a standstill, tap the speech-bubble or triangle icon on the right-hand side of the map to open the 'Add a report' panel. Choose what you want to report, such as Crash, 'Lane closure' or 'Stalled vehicle' (see screenshot above right) to share the location of the incident with the Google Maps community.



Other drivers can tap to confirm the incident, and see where the report came from – which helps prevent fake reports from timewasters. The feature is also available in Google Maps for Android Auto and Apple CarPlay.

Not to be outdone, Waze has expanded its traffic-updates reports to include congestion caused by events such as parades, concerts and football matches. The app will now notify you when you've driven into an area where an event is taking place, and let you share the details with friends and family.

ANDROID

Check the zoom level for WhatsApp photos

The Android version of WhatsApp (www.snipca.com/51648) has added a zoom indicator, so you can check the magnification level when you take photos to share in chats. Press the camera button next to the message box, select Photo then reverse-pinch your screen to zoom in.

The new indicator will appear on the right of the circular shutter button (see screenshot above right), and range from the default zoom level of 1x to 8x. Tap the number in the indicator to quickly zoom back out, or pinch your screen to do so manually.

BEST NEW APPS What you should install this fortnight

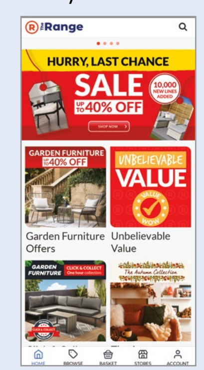
The Range

Free

Android www.snipca.com/51642

iOS www.snipca.com/51643

Home, leisure and garden store The Range finally has an Android app, and has also updated its buggy iOS version. Browse more than 65,000 products across departments, such as 'Sofas & Chairs', 'Garden Pavilions & Pergolas' and 'Paint & Accessories', view The Range's latest offers and find your nearest store.



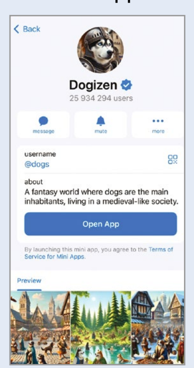
Telegram Messenger

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/51639

iOS www.snipca.com/51640

Private messaging service Telegram has a new mini app store that makes it easier to use and play apps and games. Tap the new Apps tab to see a list of mini apps you already have installed and to explore thousands more. There's also a new in-app browser, which lets you switch seamlessly between websites and chats.



Overcast

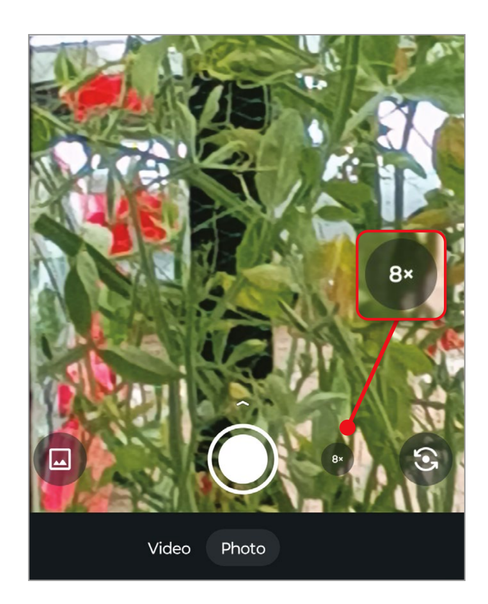
Free

iOS www.snipca.com/51628

This popular podcast player has been redesigned to make it faster to load and simpler to use. Its controls are now easier to access on large-screen iPhones and a new Undo button lets you instantly jump back to where you left off listening. Overcast has dropped the option to stream podcasts, so you'll need to download them instead.



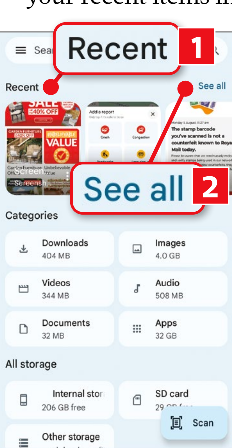
*Contains in-app purchases



The zoom indicator is only available for photos, not videos you record through WhatsApp. Meta, which owns WhatsApp, has yet to confirm if it will be added to the iOS version of the app.

ANDROID
Find recent files faster in 'Files by Google'

Google's excellent free file manager 'Files by Google' (www.snipca.com/51644) has been updated to make it easier to access files you recently created, downloaded or edited. A new Recent section at the top of the Files screen (1 in our screenshot below) displays your recent items in a carousel-style format, similar to the Memories feature in Google Photos.

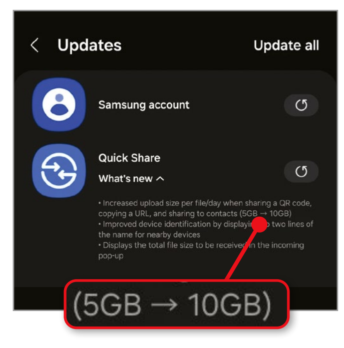


Swipe the carousel to browse the 10 most recent files, or choose 'See all' 2 to go further back. Each recent entry has a three-dot icon you can tap to share the file, delete it by moving it to the bin or add it to your 'starred' collection of items.

ANDROID
Share 10GB of files per day with Samsung Quick Share

Samsung's Quick Share app for Galaxy phones and tablets (www.snipca.com/51647) lets you quickly transfer large files to nearby Galaxy devices or your Windows PC via Bluetooth – with no limit on the size. However, if you want to share a file with a contact outside your Bluetooth range or who uses a non-Galaxy device, you need either to send the other person a link to the item or get them to scan a QR code.

Those two options previously limited you to sharing files of up to 5GB in size and a maximum of 5GB of data a day, but Samsung has now increased both limits to 10GB (see screenshot left). This means you can now share twice as much every day, without worrying about the upload being rejected.



Additionally, the updated Quick Share app provides clearer information about nearby devices that are available to share with, and tells you the total size of files people are sending *you*.

Note that, for security reasons, you can't share executable files with extensions such as '.exe', '.bat' or '.vbs'.

BEST APPS FOR... Earning rewards on your phone

Airtime

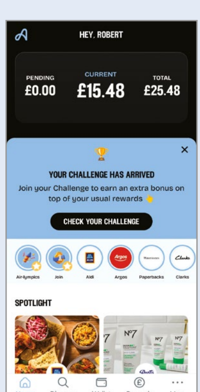
Free

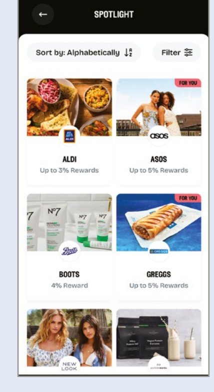
Android www.snipca.com/51651

iOS www.snipca.com/51652

Save money on your monthly mobile bill by linking your payment card and phone number to Airtime, then earning credit when you shop with one of its partners. These include Aldi, Argos, Boots, Greggs, Morrisons and many more. Airtime works with all four major mobile networks and some MVNOs, including Lebara and Giffgaff.

Best For Rewards for shopping





Google Opinion Rewards

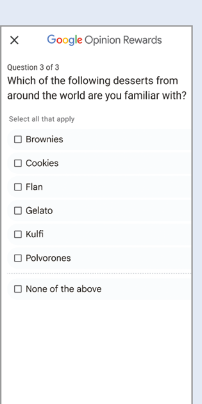
Free

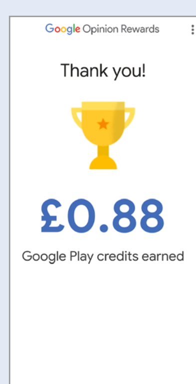
Android www.snipca.com/51649

iOS www.snipca.com/51650

With Google's long-running app, you can earn credit by completing short surveys and spend it on apps and games in the Google Play Store. Alternatively, you can cash it in via PayPal or put it towards the cost of YouTube Premium. Tweak your 'Survey eligibility' settings to increase the number of tasks you get.

Best For Rewards from surveys





Swagbucks

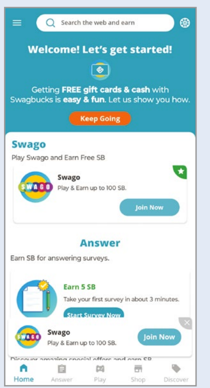
Free

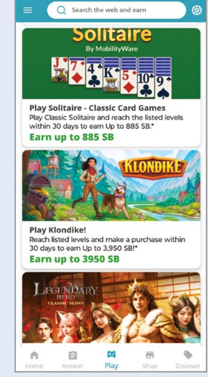
Android www.snipca.com/51657

iOS www.snipca.com/51658

Swagbucks also rewards you for completing surveys, but offers several other ways to earn credit – called SB – you can exchange for cash and gift cards. These include playing mobile games such as Monopoly Go and Solitaire, getting cashback when you buy from its retail partners and by scanning your shopping receipts.

Best For Rewards for playing games





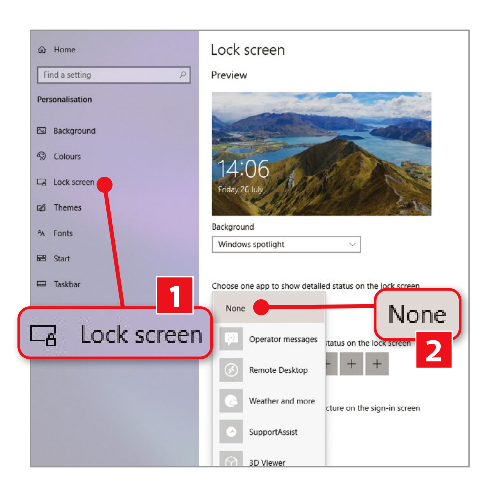
*Contains in-app purchases

WINDOWS 10

Remove lock screen widgets

Microsoft has added widgets to the Windows 10 lock screen, having done so in Windows 11 earlier this year. These show information on the weather, finance, sports and traffic before you log into your computer. But you can remove them if you find they simply clutter your lock screen.

Press Windows key+I to open Settings then click Personalisation followed by 'Lock screen' (1 in our screenshot below). Click the button below 'Choose one app to show detailed status on the lock screen' and change this from 'Weather and more' to None 2.

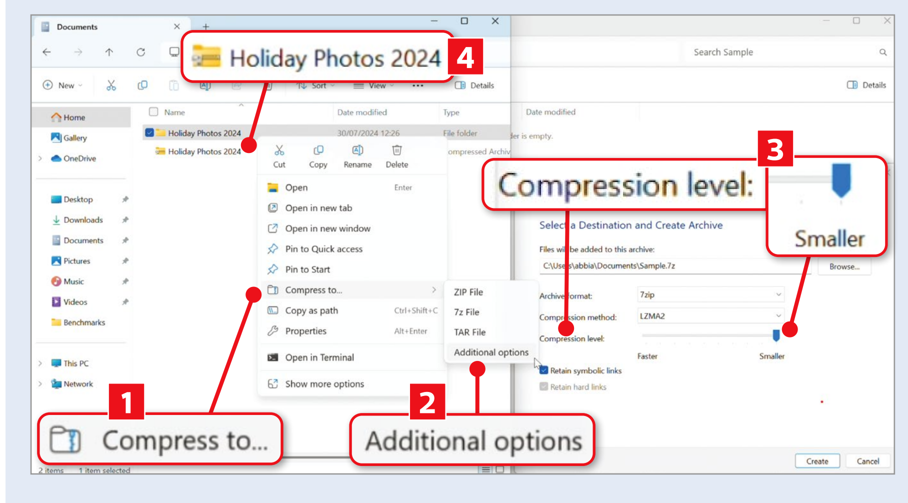


WINDOWS 11

Choose the size of compressed files

Update KB5040442 for Windows 11 22H2 and 23H2, released in July, added options for controlling how small you want files to be when compressing them to ZIP, 7z or TAR formats. Right-click a folder, then hover your cursor over 'Compress to' (1 in our screenshot) and click 'Additional options' 2.

Now choose the archive format, the compression method and the compression level. In our example, we kept the format and method as they were, but moved the 'Compression level:' slider to the furthest right 3 to make our compressed files as small as possible. Hover your cursor over the slider to see the compression number (it's six by default, and nine where we moved it). We clicked Create and the compressed 7-Zip file 4 appeared in File Explorer.



WINDOWS 11

Copy files with Windows Share

Also new in update KB5040442 (see tip above right) is the option to copy a file while you're using Windows Share. This is a menu with the option to share files on social-media sites, like WhatsApp and X, or by email.

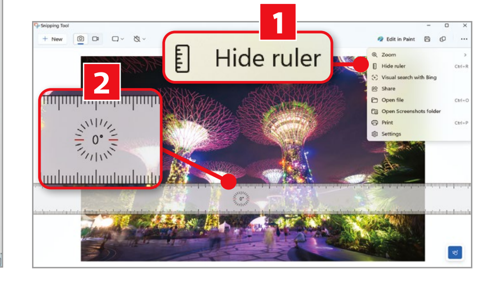
To copy a file, right-click it then select Share. In the window that opens, click the Copy button adjacent to the file name, which looks like two pages stacked on top of one another, and it will turn into a blue tick (1 in our screenshot below).

Now you can paste your file in, for example, the body of an email by right-clicking and selecting Paste 2, or use the Ctrl+V shortcut. The file will appear as an attachment 3.

WINDOWS 11 INSIDER

Use ruler in Snipping Tool again

Microsoft is bringing back the ruler to Snipping Tool, having removed it earlier this year. It's part of Windows 11 preview build 11.2404.40.0, available to Insiders on all channels. After you take a screenshot, click the 'See more' button – three dots top right – followed by 'Show ruler'. When you do this the option will change to 'Hide ruler' (1 in our screenshot below), and the ruler will appear over your screenshot 2. You can move it by clicking and dragging it with your cursor, and can rotate it by scrolling up or down. It works the same as before, helping you draw straight lines and measure lengths.

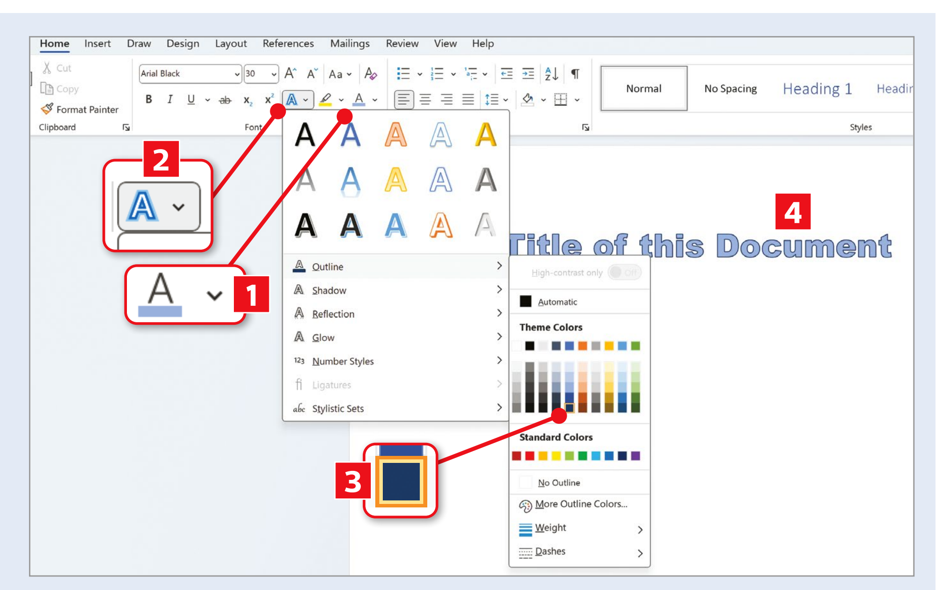


MICROSOFT WORD

Add outlines to your headings

As well as making headings big and colourful so they stand out, you can add striking text effects. In our example, we've typed a heading in light blue and given it a much darker outline. This adds clarity to the letters. You can also add shadows, reflections and glows.

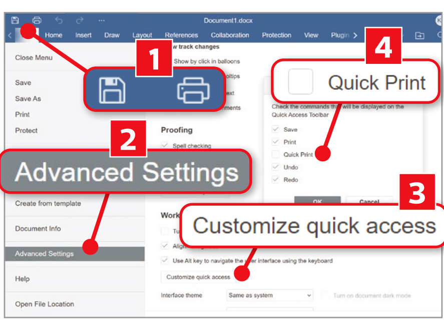
First, we highlighted our heading, then clicked the Home tab at the top, followed by the Font Color dropdown menu (1 in our screenshot). We then chose 'Blue, Accent 1, Lighter 40%'. Next, we clicked the 'Text Effects and Typography' dropdown menu 2, hovered over Outline, and chose 'Blue, Accent 1, Darker 50%' 3. The dark outline was instantly applied to our heading 4.



ONLYOFFICE

Choose what appears on your Quick Access menu

With OnlyOffice 8.1, released in June, you can choose which buttons appear on the Quick Access menu in the document editor. These are a set of shortcuts that appear above the toolbar and include options like Save and Print (1 in our screenshot below). Click File, Advanced Settings 2, then scroll down and in the Workspace section click 'Customize quick access' 3. In the box that appears, untick all the options you don't want to appear in the menu, then press OK. In our example, we unticked Quick Print 4 and it was removed from our quick access menu.

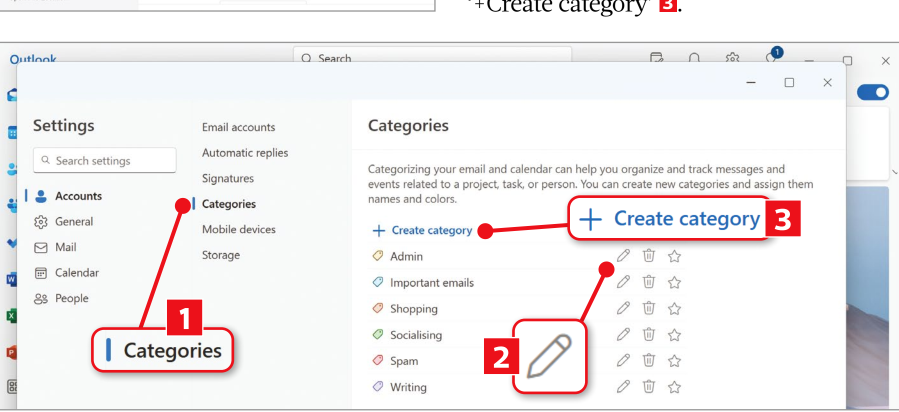


MICROSOFT OUTLOOK

Organise emails with coloured categories

Microsoft's new Outlook isn't to everyone's taste, as we explained in Issue 686 (page 62), but one of its best features lets you organise your emails using coloured labels for different categories.

Click the Settings cog icon at the top right, followed by Accounts on the left then Categories (1 in our screenshot below). Here, you'll see a list of categories assigned to default colours. Click the Edit (pencil) icon 2, then type a new name and choose a colour from the 25 options. Click Save to confirm. You can also remove labels by clicking the Delete (bin) icon, and create new labels by clicking '+Create category' 3.

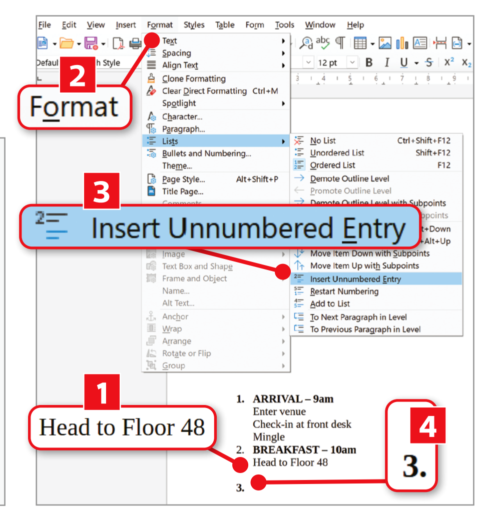


LIBREOFFICE WRITER

Insert unnumbered info in a numbered list

When creating a numbered list, you may want to add several lines of information before moving on to the next number. In our example, we're building an agenda by using the first line of each number as a heading that includes a time and an activity. We're then adding unnumbered entries with more information about what that activity involves.

First, we placed our cursor at the end of 'Head to Floor 48' (1 in our screenshot below), then we clicked Format on the top toolbar 2. We hovered over Lists, then chose Insert Unnumbered Entry 3. A new line appeared between 'Head to Floor 48' and '3' that we could type into, without it being automatically numbered 4.





Create flyers with Microsoft Designer

In past columns we've covered several tools for creating club designs for material such as flyers and posters, including Adobe Spark and Canva. There's now a new option: Microsoft Designer. Previously, the full version was available only online (at www.snipca.com/51150), but Microsoft has now launched it as a mobile app, and a downloadable Windows app from the Microsoft Store.

Designer is simple enough to use on a phone, so that's what we'll explain here. We've used an Android device, but the instructions are similar for iPhones and iPads, and for the PC version.

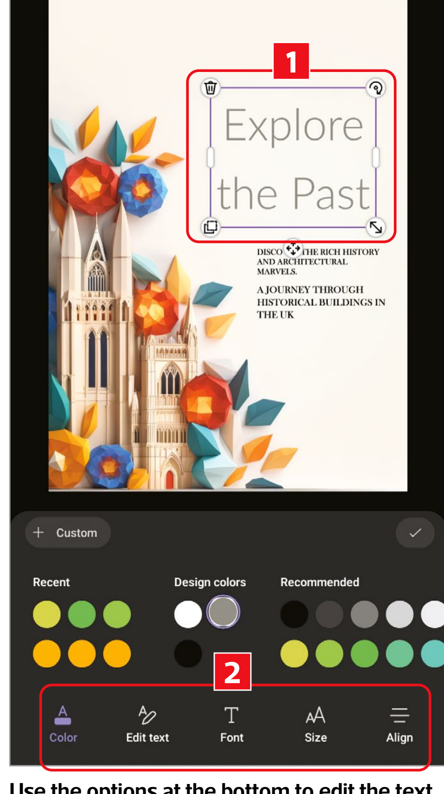
Add images and text with AI

Like most modern design tools, it can use AI to create images based on what you ask for. Install the app (Android www.snipca.com/51463; iOS www.snipca.com/51464), then sign in with your Microsoft account.

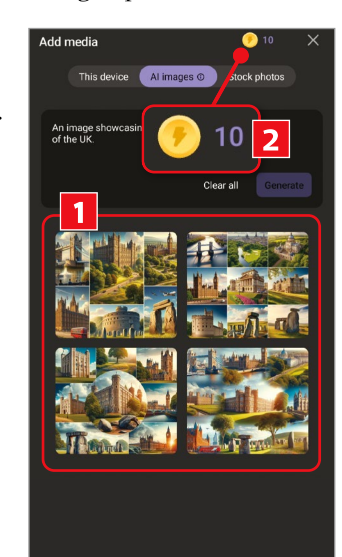
You'll see a number of 'Create with AI' options, including wallpapers, stickers and monograms. But for a flyer, tap Invitations, then type a description (or 'prompt') of the image you want Designer to generate. We asked it to "create a flyer about the history of the UK with the title Historical Buildings In The UK".

This will generate an image with text, but you can edit it to your liking. Tap the text and an editable purple box will appear around it (1 in our screenshot above right). Use the options at the bottom to edit the text, and to change its font, size and alignment 2.

Now click the image to see more editing options in the bottom half of your screen, including filters and removing or blurring the background of the image. You can also replace the image, so tap that to see three options: This Device, AI Images and Stock Photos. We chose AI Images, then typed An image showcasing the best historical buildings in the UK then tapped Generate. The results weren't bad – Tower Bridge, Stonehenge, Parliament (1 in our screenshot left) – though some of the buildings had slightly fanciful surroundings.



Use the options at the bottom to edit the text that appears in your flyer



Microsoft Designer created a composite image showing some of the UK's most famous buildings

Once you're happy with your flyer, tap the top-right Share icon to share or save it (as PNG, JPEG or PDF). Bear in mind that you can only create 15 AI images a day for free. You'll see how many you've got left at the top of the screen, next to the gold-coin icon 2. Microsoft calls each use of AI a 'boost'.



As well as using AI, you can create flyers using your own photos or stock images from Microsoft

Create your own design manually

If you don't want to use AI, or if the results aren't suitable for your purposes, you can use your own images and designs instead. Go back to Designer's home page and tap Portrait. You'll see a blank page with three options: 'Add media', 'Add text' and 'Add graphics'.

Clicking 'Add graphics' lets you search Microsoft's collection of stock images – you can select from illustrations, shapes or icons. Likewise, 'Add media' lets you search stock photos, though you can also add one of your own snaps. We chose a recent stock picture of Edinburgh, changed the text to green, and added a golden-circle illustration bottom right (see screenshot above). Once you've finished, you can save and share the image by following the steps above.

Next issue: Use AI to build a website

What's All the
Fuss About...

Adverts in Skype

As hell freezes over, Microsoft actually says it'll *remove* some ads

What are they?
You'll know if you've used Skype at any point in the past 12 years or so. Adverts appear in the main chat interface and also in the Channels section. Over time they've become more distracting and annoying, but in a surprise move Microsoft has said it'll soon remove them.



Really? Why has it done that?
Because it wants Skype to be "a smoother, decluttered and more enjoyable user experience". It's part of an overhaul focused on a "user-centric design" that prioritises feedback to create "a more streamlined and pleasant environment across all platforms" (see www.snipca.com/51645).

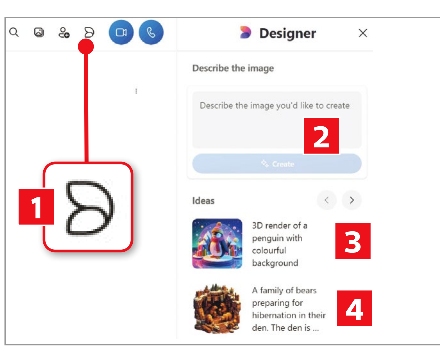
Shouldn't Skype have been like that all along?
Yes, you'd have thought so. But Microsoft couldn't resist the potential for making money through Skype. This was exemplified in 2012 when it introduced 'Conversation Ads', which showed personalised ads based on location, gender and age. Microsoft claimed that users "should think of Conversation Ads as a way for Skype to generate fun interactivity between your circle of friends and family and the brands you care about". Instead, users thought they were creepy and intrusive.

So why has it changed its mind after all its time?
Probably because it's not making much money from adverts, and so is cutting its losses and removing them, but describing it as a redesign that makes Skype easier to use. However, for now they've been axed from only the latest version for Skype Insiders (8.125.76.201, www.skype.com/insider), though it's such a significant move that it's bound to be repeated for the full version of the software across all platforms: Windows, macOS, Linux, iOS and Android.

Does this mean Microsoft will remove adverts from other services?
Highly unlikely. It's increasingly treating Windows as a billboard to promote its tools. In April, for example, it started showing apps from its Store in the 'Recommended' section of Windows 11's Start menu. It was already showing ads in desktop notifications, in the Settings app and on the lock screen. And that's on top of all the marketing tricks we expose in our 'Named & Shamed' section – see page 21 for the latest.

Does anyone still use Skype though?
Yes, around 40 million people a day, and some 300 million every month. It still offers free international calls if both the caller and recipient are on Skype, and you can send video or voice messages. However, since the Covid pandemic most companies have switched to paid-for versions of Zoom, Google Meet and Microsoft's own Teams tool, which offer more advanced features for group calls. However, Skype hopes it has one other trick up its sleeve to fight back.

What's that?
The ability to create images using AI while chatting. It uses Microsoft's new Designer tool (see also opposite page), which you can now open in Skype by clicking the button at the top (1 in our screenshot above) or from within the chat windows 2.



The new Skype – ideal for creating 3D penguins and hibernating bears

What can you create with it?
Well, Microsoft gives the examples of a '3D render of a penguin with colourful background' 3 and 'a family of bears preparing for hibernation in their den' 4.

And why would you want to create those?
Good question. It could be fun for a while, especially when chatting with the grandchildren as you compete for the best image, but the novelty might quickly fade. Still, it's certainly closer to "fun interactivity" than showing adverts based on your interests. Microsoft has hopefully learned that lesson.

Make Your USB STICKS Last Forever

Don't risk losing important files stored on old removable drives. **Robert Irvine** explains how to maintain and protect your USB sticks to keep them fast, reliable and secure



Unlike most tech products, USB sticks are cheap and easy to replace. You can buy a large-capacity model for less than a tenner, plug it straight into your PC and use it with no configuration required.

That doesn't make it any less inconvenient or frustrating when a removable drive stops functioning properly, however, whether it's because it contains important files or it's the only storage device you have to hand.

USB sticks have a limited lifespan, but their performance doesn't degrade over time. Instead, their reliability depends on how many times you write data to and erase it from their flash memory, which is known as a 'write cycle'.

Most USB sticks support 100,000 write cycles, which can equate to decades of use – we own devices that still work after 20 years of use. But cheaper devices, especially unbranded ones, tend to use lower-quality flash memory than those from specialist manufacturers. This can drastically reduce their lifespan to 10,000 write cycles or fewer, which could mean they fail unexpectedly within a few years.

Other factors that can affect the health and contents of your USB sticks include environmental conditions, physical damage, malware infection and human interference. In this feature, we explain the best free ways to maintain and protect your removable drives to ensure you never lose your precious data.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Find and repair errors on your USB sticks
- Transfer files faster without losing data
- Restore a USB drive to its full capacity
- Stop files being changed or deleted
- Find out if a cheap USB stick is a fake
- Automatically scan drives for malware
- Recover deleted files from a USB stick
- Test and compare your device's speed

PREVENT & FIX PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS

Detect and fix errors on your USB sticks

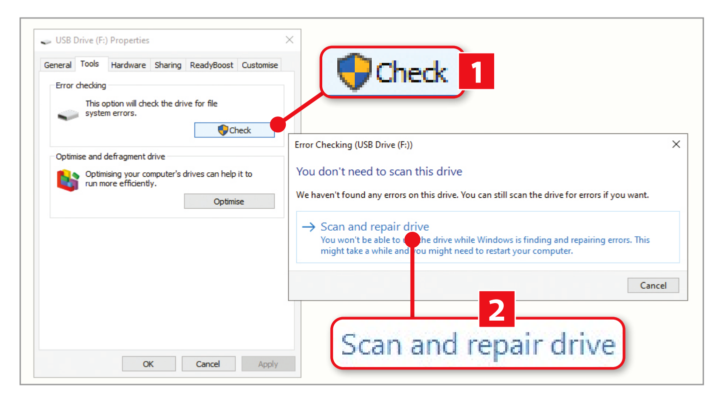
When you insert a USB stick into your computer, Windows should automatically check it for errors. These include bad sectors, which are areas on the drive where data can no longer be read or written; file-system errors, which occur when the storage structure of the stick has become corrupted; and logical errors, which relate to outdated drivers and compatibility issues.

If Windows detects any problems, you'll see a notification in the bottom-right corner of your desktop. Depending on the type of the error, this may say 'There's a problem with this drive', 'The file or directory is unreadable and corrupted' or 'The USB device is not recognised'. Click the notification to run a full scan and Windows will attempt to fix the errors.

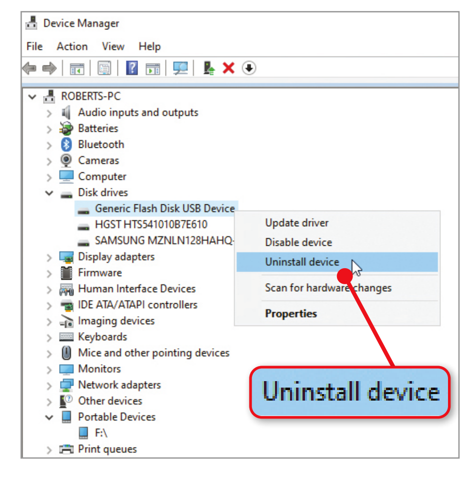
Alternatively, you can check a USB stick yourself to make sure it's working properly. Press Windows key+E to open File Explorer, select This PC on the left and right-click the drive letter for your USB stick.

Choose 'Properties' then the Tools tab and click the Check button in the 'Error checking' section (1 in our screenshot below). Select 'Scan and repair drive' 2 and Windows will find and fix errors on the stick. The 'Error checking' tool may say you don't need to scan the drive, but it's worth doing anyway.

You can also use the Windows CHKDSK command to detect and repair errors. Type cmd in the search box, press Enter and choose 'Run as administrator' under Command Prompt. Click 'Yes' and, when Command Prompt opens, type the following command and press Enter: chkdsk [drive letter]: /f /r /x – replace '[drive letter]' with your USB stick's actual drive letter. For example, chkdsk j: /f /r /x if the letter is 'J:'.



Use the 'Error checking' tool to find and repair problems on your USB sticks



If Windows doesn't recognise a USB stick, try uninstalling the device, then reinserting it

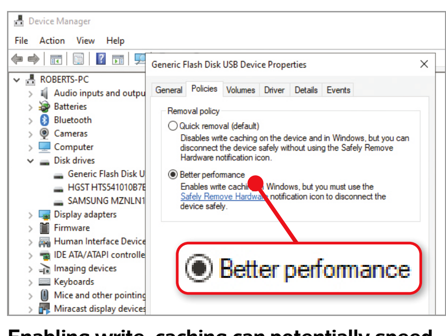
If Windows is unable to recognise your USB stick in order to perform a scan, right-click the Start button and choose Device Manager in the menu that opens.

Check both the 'Disk drives' and 'Portable devices' lists for the name of your USB stick or an 'Unknown device' error. If you don't see it in those lists, check under USB Serial Bus controllers. Right-click the drive, choose 'Uninstall device' (see screenshot above) and click Uninstall. Unplug then reinsert the USB stick and Windows should now recognise the device, so you can scan it for other errors.

Enable write caching for better performance

Like SSDs, USB sticks use a feature called write-caching to temporarily store data in their memory before it's permanently saved to a block. This allows them to perform operations more quickly, though it means you risk losing data and causing errors if you remove the stick while files are still copying.

For this reason, unlike with SSDs, write-caching for USB sticks is disabled by default in Windows 10 and 11.



Enabling write-caching can potentially speed up an old USB stick

Switching it on can potentially make a drive faster at writing data, but it also means you'll need to click its system-tray icon and choose Eject to safely disconnect the device from Windows.

Write-caching needs to be enabled separately for each drive, so you can apply it to older, slower sticks, but not newer, faster ones. This will let you unplug the latter without losing any data, simply by pulling them out of the port.

To activate the feature, open Device Manager and right-click your USB stick under 'Disk drives'. Choose 'Properties', click the Policies tab and select 'Better performance' (see screenshot above), then click 'OK' to confirm.

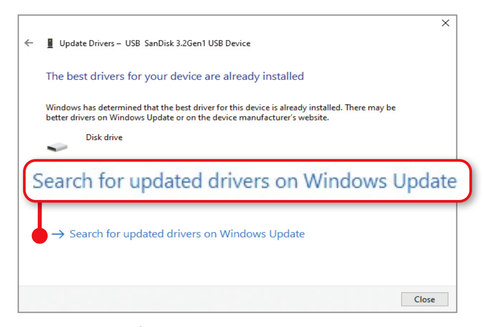
If you get annoyed with having to eject the stick each time you want to remove it, switch back to 'Quick removal' on the Policies tab.

Update the drivers for your USB sticks

Even if your USB stick isn't suffering a 'logical error', outdated device drivers can affect its data-transfer rate and load time. Most older sticks don't require special drivers, and simply use the generic mass-storage driver in Windows, but newer, higher-end devices, from companies such as SanDisk, Kingston and Corsair, sometimes have their own software.

Drivers should be updated automatically through Windows Update, but the latest versions may not have been installed yet. To update the driver for a USB stick, open Device Manager, right-click the name of the drive in the 'Disk drives' list and choose 'Update driver'. You can first verify the driver provider by selecting Properties and clicking the Driver tab – if this says Microsoft, Windows is using its own generic driver.

Click 'Update Driver', then 'Search automatically for drivers' to search your



Keep your USB stick running smoothly by updating its drivers

PC for the best available drivers for your USB stick. If Windows says these are already installed, click 'Search for updated drivers on Windows Update' (see screenshot above) to check for newer versions.

You may also be able to download drivers from the manufacturer's website, and install them manually. However, companies generally only provide them as part of the firmware for their latest devices – not for discontinued sticks.

Never defragment your USB sticks

Although it's possible to defragment a USB stick using a defrag tool such as WinContig (www.snipca.com/51667), this will reduce rather than prolong the drive's lifespan. Unlike traditional hard drives, USB sticks have no moving parts, which means there's no speed benefit in trying to improve their 'seek time' by defragmenting.

The flash memory used by USB sticks makes all data equally easy to access, rather than presenting it sequentially, so defragmentation – which reorganises files into contiguous blocks – is unnecessary. Because it involves writing information to a drive, the defragging process counts towards your stick's write-cycle limit, causing it to wear out more quickly.

Defragging USB sticks is unnecessary and will reduce their lifespan

When we used WinContig to defrag a USB stick, it found and fixed just one fragmented file on the entire 32GB drive (see screenshot above), which really wasn't worth the effort. Similarly, the Optimise Drives feature in Windows 10 and 11 disables the option to defragment flash-memory drives, because there's no reason to do so.

Reformat USB sticks to boost their speed and capacity

Reformatting a USB stick is the best solution to a variety of common problems, including sluggish performance, reduced capacity and incompatibility with the device you've plugged it into. Windows may even say the drive *has* to be formatted before you can use it, and then prompt you to click the 'Format disk' button.

The downside is that reformatting will erase all the data from the stick, so make sure you copy any important files to your PC before you proceed. Once this is done, open This PC in File Explorer, right-click the USB drive and choose Format.

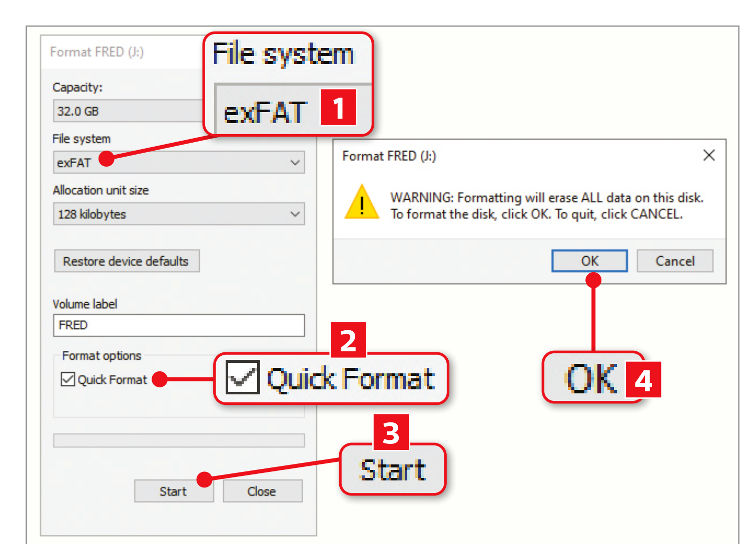
Check that the capacity is correct and choose a file system in the dropdown menu. The best option is exFAT (**1** in our screenshot below left), because it's optimised for flash-memory drives and is less restrictive than FAT32, which only supports files of up to 4GB. ExFAT also lets you read and write data on a wider range of operating systems than NTFS, including Windows, Linux, macOS and Chrome OS, so you shouldn't experience any compatibility issues.

However, some smart TVs *don't* support exFAT, including Samsung Full HD models and LG sets. If you plan to insert the stick into your TV, so you can watch videos and access other files on the big screen, you may need to choose FAT32 or NTFS instead. Check your TV manufacturer's support site for file-system information.

The 'Allocation unit size' menu specifies how the USB stick's storage is divided up. Smaller units mean less wasted space, but slightly slower performances. Either leave this as the pre-selected size or choose 'Default allocation size'.

To thoroughly erase everything stored on the drive, untick the Quick Format option **2**, which simply allows data to be overwritten – it can often still be recovered (see page 56). Bear in mind that a full format not only takes much longer but also involves a lot more writing and erasing than a quick one. If performed too often, a full format will significantly reduce the USB stick's lifespan.

Finally, click Start **3** to format the drive – click OK **4** when you see the warning, to confirm you understand you'll lose all your data. Click 'OK' again once the (re)formatting is complete, and your old USB stick should be nearly as good as new.



Reformatting a USB stick restores its former speed and capacity

PREVENT PHYSICAL DAMAGE TO YOUR USB STICKS

Keep your USB sticks cool, dry and clean

As USB sticks don't have any moving parts, they're not as delicate as many devices and can withstand occasional drops, bangs and even being stepped on. But their internal components are still susceptible to damage from excessive heat, which can cause their memory cells to become unstable. This may lead to errors when reading or writing data, and the loss of important files.

It's therefore important to keep an eye on how hot your USB stick is getting – especially when performing resource-intensive tasks such as booting an operating system or transferring large files.

Unfortunately, because USB sticks don't have internal sensors and few support SMART data, it's not possible to monitor their temperature using tools such as CrystalDiskInfo (www.snipca.com/51675) and HWMonitor (www.snipca.com/51674). This means the only reliable way to ensure they're not overheating is to touch them – but don't burn your fingers, and allow them to cool down before removal.

The temperature at which you store a USB stick can also affect its data retention. Exposure to intense heat may cause its plastic casing to warp or metal elements to expand, leading to a loose connection with your PC's ports. To stop this happening, keep your device away from direct sunlight, radiators and other heat sources.

It's equally essential to prevent liquid and dust from getting inside the case of the drive or its connector plug. This can cause serious damage to the memory chip and the mass-storage controller that enables the device to communicate with your PC.

Your stick may have come with a protective cap or swivel shield, or have a retractable connector, but the best way to safeguard it against the elements is in a portable case or pouch. For multiple devices, you can buy the JBOS Storage Bag from Amazon for £8.99 (www.snipca.com/51676, pictured below left). This stores up to 10 sticks in a lightweight (70g), dustproof and anti-static bag that's secured with a zip.



Keep your USB sticks in a storage case so they don't get wet or dusty



Repeatedly knocking a USB stick can cause its plug to go wonky

Try not to knock your USB sticks

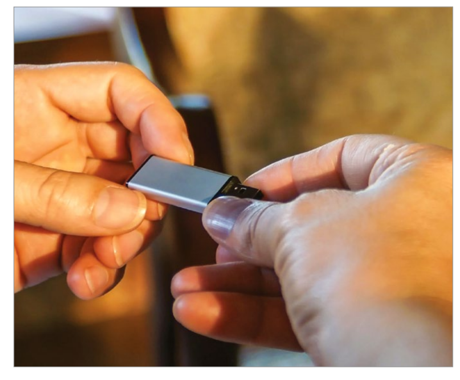
Bulky USB sticks that protrude from your PC are at risk of damage caused by accidental knocks. It's easy to forget you've got one plugged into your laptop, then brush against it when you move to another location or pack the laptop in a bag.

Over time, these knocks can cause the connectors that link the USB plug to the stick's circuit board to become loose – particularly on cheaper sticks that use low-quality components. You'll notice this happening if you find yourself having to wiggle the USB stick from side to side just to get your computer to recognise it, or needing to prop it up to secure it.

Eventually, the connectors inside the USB stick may detach completely, which no amount of wiggling will fix, and leave the plug looking skewiff (see picture above).

At this point, you'll either need to take the device to your local gadget-repair shop or, if you're confident with a soldering iron, open the case and reattach the plug yourself – as demonstrated in this YouTube video: www.snipca.com/51677. However, neither option is guaranteed to succeed, and unless there's very important data stored on the device, it will be easier just to buy a new one.

Before paying to repair or replace a broken USB stick, try inserting it in another USB port on your PC, in case the accidental knocks damaged the socket rather than the drive itself.



To avoid disaster, unplug your USB stick until you need to use it

Unplug USB sticks when they're not in use

It's convenient to leave at least one USB stick permanently plugged into your computer. This allows you to quickly copy files to and from the device, without having to insert and remove it every time.

However, opinions vary over whether leaving a USB stick plugged in will affect its lifespan. In theory, this shouldn't happen because – aside from scheduled backups – Windows and other software won't secretly write data to the device in the background and use up its write cycles.

Of more concern is that by keeping the drive constantly connected to a power source, without proper heat dissipation, you may damage its internal components. This is a particular hazard with cheap, low-quality sticks and can lead to impaired performance and data loss – especially if there's a power surge.

There's also a risk that if your PC is infected by malware, it may spread to the removable drive without you realising, and infect other computers you insert it into. To be on the safe side, remove your USB sticks when not in use (pictured above), just in case disaster strikes.



READER OFFER!

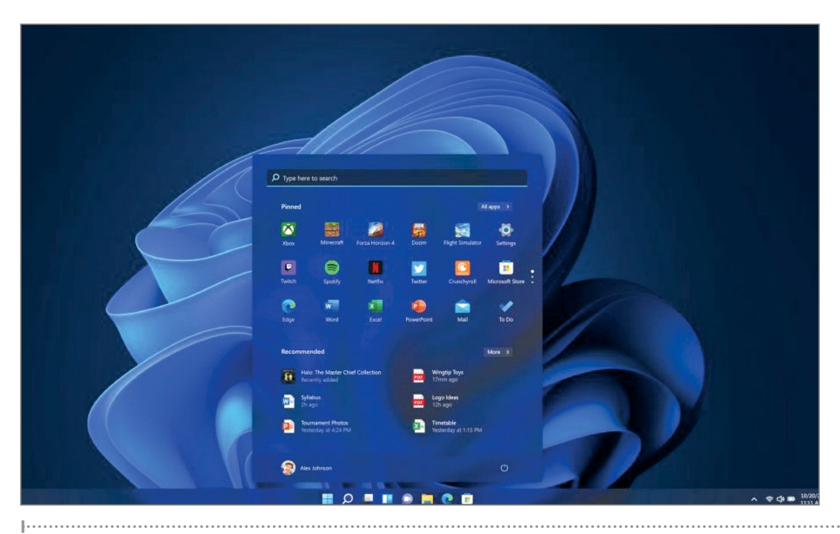


Upgrade to Windows 11 Pro for just £49.99!

Your PC almost certainly came with Windows 11 Home. But did you know it's easy to upgrade to **Windows 11 Pro** to get advanced features like BitLocker drive encryption?

There's no need to install a new version of Windows – just take your new Professional key, go to System, Activate, then select 'Change Product Key'.

To upgrade, visit **www.snipca.com/50563** and click the red **Buy Now** button on the right.





JUST SO YOU KNOW...

This offer can be used by one person only, and expires at midnight on **10 September, 2024**. It's a lifetime licence for one computer.

PROTECT DATA STORED ON YOUR USB STICKS

Activate write-protection on sensitive sticks

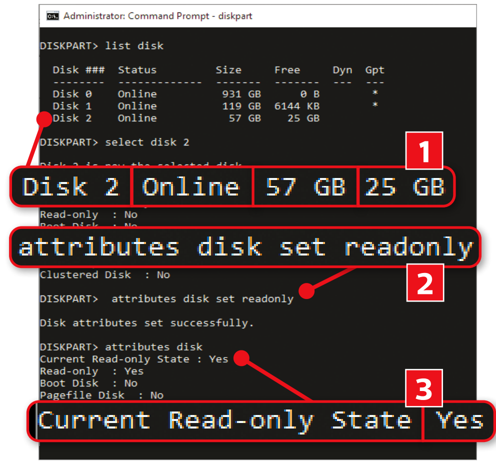
Some USB sticks (and SD cards) used to have a physical write-protect switch that made the device 'read-only'. When locked, this prevented data from being copied to or from the drive, or accidentally erased. The trouble was that the switch could be instantly unlocked to remove its protection. This is why manufacturers now offer more secure fingerprint locks or keypads – though usually only on more expensive devices.

If your USB stick contains sensitive files, and doesn't have a fingerprint lock, keypad or write-protect switch, you can use the Windows tool DiskPart to protect its data. This lets you make drives read-only, so nobody who uses your PC can change their contents.

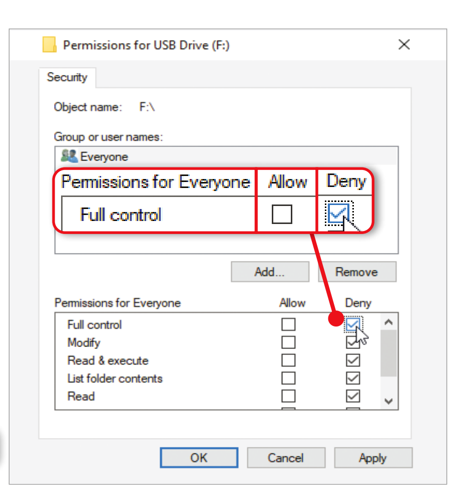
To use DiskPart, type cmd in the Windows search box and choose 'Run as administrator' under Command Prompt. When Command Prompt opens, type diskpart and press Enter, then type list disk and press Enter again. This will list all the drives connected to your PC – you should be able to identify the drive number of your USB stick from its size – it's Disk 2 **1** in our screenshot above right.

Type select disk followed by the disk number, then press Enter, to switch to that drive, then type attributes disk and press Enter again. This will tell you that the USB stick is currently not read-only. To change this and lock down your data, type attributes disk set readonly **2** and press Enter – you should see the message 'Disk attributes set successfully'.

Type attributes disk again to confirm that your USB stick is now read-only **3**, so its contents can't be changed. To remove write-protection, repeat the steps above, but this time type attributes disk clear readonly.



Make a USB stick read-only to stop its contents being changed



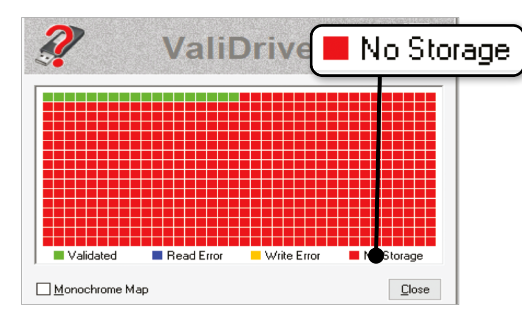
Change your stick's permissions to protect its data on *any* PC

Note that the drive's read-only status only applies when it's inserted in *your* PC – on other computers, it will still be writable. However, if the stick is formatted as NTFS, you can make it read-only on all devices. To do so, right-click it in File Explorer, choose Properties and click the Security tab. Click 'Edit', and change the permissions for 'Everyone' from Allow to Deny (see screenshot top right), then click Apply. You can reverse these permissions when you need to access the drive's contents yourself.

Ensure you're not using a 'fake' USB stick

'Fake' USB sticks, which don't offer anywhere near as much storage as they claim, have flooded online marketplaces such as Amazon, eBay and AliExpress. Although these cheap devices promise 1TB or 2TB capacities, and show that figure in File Explorer when plugged into your PC, they actually offer significantly less storage.

Once their true space has been filled, any further content copied to the drive will not be stored – only details of the file names, sizes and dates – which means you risk losing valuable data. To ensure your USB stick offers its claimed capacity, test it before you copy files to it, using the free program ValiDrive (www.snipca.com/51682).



ValiDrive checks your USB stick's capacity so you don't lose data

This exposes fake USB drives by checking the device's declared storage space, and verifying whether it can successfully store data in random sectors. Unlike similar tools, ValiDrive won't overwrite any files and doesn't require you to reformat the drive. Validated sectors are shown as green blocks, while those with no storage are indicated in red (see screenshot above).

ValiDrive can also detect read and write access errors, in case your memory stick has become corrupted – or already was when you bought it. Its developer tested the tool on 12 USB sticks bought from Amazon, and found they were all well under capacity.

Avoid working directly from your USB stick

One of the main benefits of USB sticks is that you can carry around important files and portable versions of your favourite software to open on any PC. But editing these files and running these programs directly from the device uses multiple read/write cycles, which reduces its lifespan.

Where possible, copy the files you want to work with to the computer you're using, then save the edited versions back to the removable drive when you're finished. This will require a lot less data-writing, but remember to delete the files from the PC, and empty the recycle bin, before you unplug the USB stick – especially if they contain sensitive information.

Similarly, you can drag the EXE file of a program to the PC's desktop, rather than launch it directly from the stick. Most portable software doesn't require installation, so provided you delete the EXE afterwards, no one will know what you've been running.

Protect your USB stick from malware

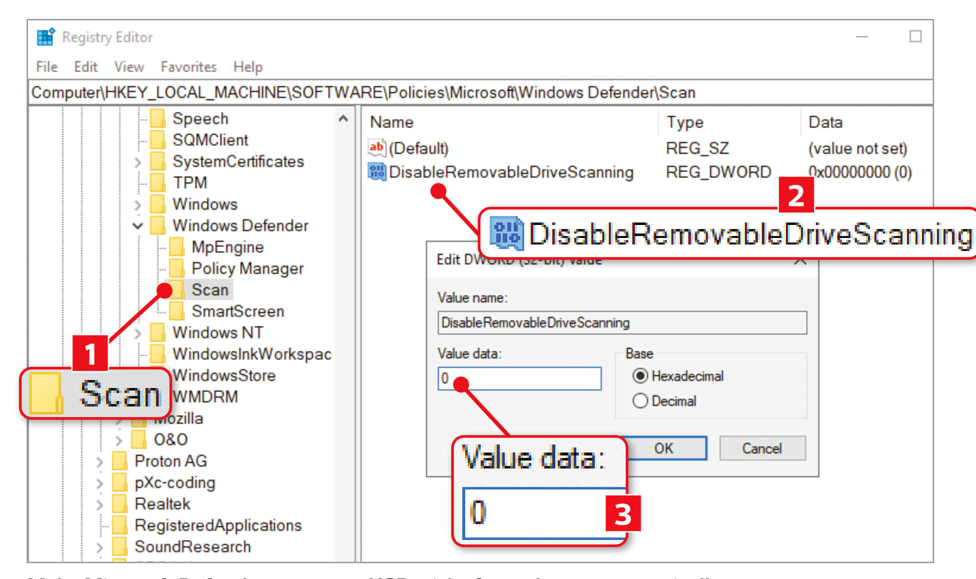
As with any drive connected to your computer, you should regularly scan your USB stick for security threats using your preferred antivirus software. This will ensure it doesn't contain malware that could infect your PC and other devices you insert it into, and corrupt or steal your data.

Some security software, such as Norton 360 (see our reader offer on page 70) scans removable drives automatically, but Windows Security doesn't. Instead, go to the 'Virus & threat protection' screen, click 'Scan options' and select 'Custom scan'. Click the 'Scan now' button and select your USB stick to perform a malware scan with Microsoft Defender.

To scan USB drives automatically as soon as they're inserted, you'll need to tweak the registry. To do so, type regedit in the Windows search box and click 'Run as administrator' under Registry Editor. Navigate to **Computer\HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SOFTWARE\Policies\Microsoft\Windows Defender**, right-click Windows Defender on the left and select New followed by Key. Name this key Scan (1 in our screenshot above right).

Next, right-click the new Scan key, and choose New followed by 'DWORD (32-bit) Value'. Name the value DisableRemovableDriveScanning 2, double-click it and ensure its 'Value data' is '0' 3). Click 'OK' to confirm.

Microsoft Defender will now automatically scan all inserted USB sticks for malware, though annoyingly it won't tell you it's done so unless it finds a security threat.



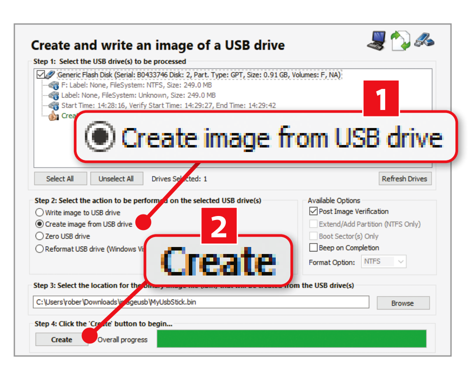
Make Microsoft Defender scan your USB sticks for malware automatically

Back up USB sticks by cloning

Given all the bad things that can happen to USB sticks – from loss and theft to data corruption and physical damage – it's vital to regularly back up their contents. That may sound counterintuitive, as removable drives are themselves often used as backup media, but there's no harm in having additional copies of your files.

The simplest way to back up a USB stick is to clone it to an image file. This copies its entire contents in one go, is quicker than saving lots of individual items and makes the backup easier to store – whether in a Windows folder, on another device or in online storage.

Download and run the free program ImageUSB by Passmark Software (www.snipca.com/51685) and select the USB stick to be backed up. Choose 'Create image from USB drive' (1 in our screenshot above right), specify where to save the image file and give it a name.



Clone a USB stick using ImageUSB to back up its entire contents in one go

Click 'Create' 2 to clone the stick to an image in BIN (binary) format.

To restore the backup to a new USB stick, select the device, choose 'Write image to USB' and click Write. Note that because ImageUSB clones unused space as well as actual files, the new stick will need to be the same capacity or larger than the original.

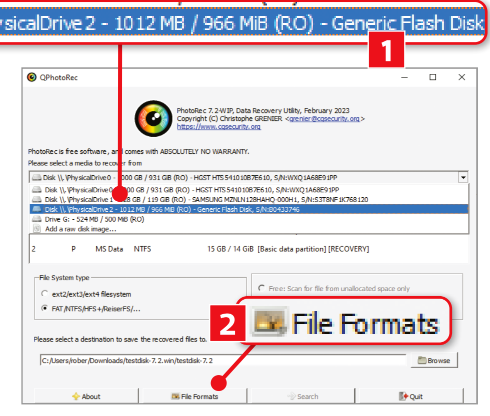
Recover lost data from a USB stick

Whether through file-system corruption or accidental deletion, you may end up losing data stored on a USB stick. However, there is a chance you can get the files back – provided you don't overwrite them with new data. Stop using the USB stick as soon as you realise items are missing, and download a file-recovery program.

Our favourite free tool for this purpose is PhotoRec, which – despite its name – doesn't only restore deleted images, but also videos, documents, PDFs and EXE files. It works with USB sticks, SD cards and hard drives, and can even recover data when a device has been reformatted.

PhotoRec needs to be downloaded with its sister program TestDisk (which restores lost partitions) from www.snipca.com/51686 – click the green TestDisk download button. Extract the contents of the ZIP file then double-click the 'qphotorec.exe' file – this applies a simple user interface to the command-line tool.

Select the USB drive you want to scan in the dropdown menu (1 in our screenshot), choose the folder to restore files to, and click Search. PhotoRec will then find and recover all files deleted from the stick. It's very thorough, so the results may



take a while to sift through – click File Formats 2 before searching to look only for lost files of specific types.

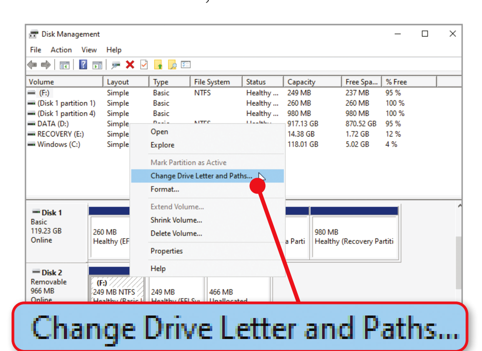
MANAGE & MONITOR YOUR USB STICKS

Assign or change a stick's drive letter

Windows should automatically assign your USB sticks a drive letter the first time you plug them into a port, and recognise them from that letter each time they're inserted. If it says a drive is unreadable, the problem may be caused by a missing or incorrect drive letter. Alternatively, you may simply want to change a stick's current drive letter to something more meaningful.

Either way, right-click the Start button and choose Disk Management. Find your USB stick in the Volume list in the top-half of the window, or in the Disk section in the bottom-half, where it should be labelled Removable and be recognisable by its size.

Right-click the stick and choose 'Change Drive Letter and Paths' (see screenshot below). Click 'Add' to assign a drive letter, or Change to give the drive a new one, and select the letter you want to use. Click 'OK', then Yes to confirm.



You can manually assign or change the drive letters of your USB sticks

Test and compare the speed of your USB sticks

Speeds vary considerably between USB sticks and depend on factors including their capacity, number of write cycles and their USB standard. You can check if a device is getting slower over time by benchmarking it using CrystalDiskMark

Download and install this free tool from www.snipca.com/51688 – click the green Installer button below Standard Edition. Launch the program and select your USB stick in the dropdown menu.

To save wearing out its write cycles by running all four thorough tests, just click the SEQ1M Q1T1 option (see screenshot below). This tests how quickly your stick can read and write sequential and random data and is most similar to real-world use – it takes around a minute to run.

Note down the read and write speeds

Check if your USB sticks are slowing down by running CrystalDiskMark

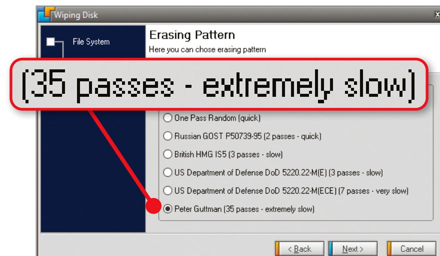
detected by CrystalDiskMark, or click the File menu to save the data as a text or image file. Compare them with future test results to discover if the stick's performance level is waning.

Safely dispose of dead USB sticks

If a USB stick is no longer usable, don't just chuck it in the bin, because its electrical parts can be recycled. First, however, you should securely erase its contents – assuming Windows still detects the device – to make even deleted data unrecoverable.

Though you can do this with a 'full format' (see page 52), for total peace of mind download Disk Wipe (www.diskwipe.org). This free program's system requirements mention only Windows XP and Vista, but it works perfectly in Windows 10 and 11.

Select your USB stick in the list of System Local Disks and click the Wipe Disk button in the top-left corner. Click 'Next' on the File System screen, then choose how many times you want to



overwrite the data on your stick, from one 'pass' to 35 (see screenshot). Click 'Next' then type ERASE ALL, and click Finish to wipe your drive.

Find a recycling centre that accepts USB sticks by entering your postcode at Recycle Your Electricals (www.snipca.com/51692). Select 'USB' in the item-type menu to view your nearest recycling locations.

Manage multiple USB sticks

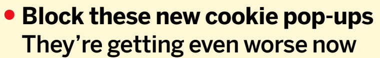
USBDeview (www.snipca.com/51690), from the prolific developer NirSoft, makes it easy to monitor all your USB sticks in one place. It lists all the USB devices currently inserted in your PC, and all those you've previously plugged in – including the times and dates you connected and disconnected them. Look for Mass Storage in the Device Type column to identify your sticks in the list.

Right-click a device to disconnect, disable or uninstall it (if the stick is lost or broken), change its drive letter and even run a basic speed test. You can also check which USB version each stick uses, ensure its drivers are up to date and generate an HTML report of all your USB devices. ca

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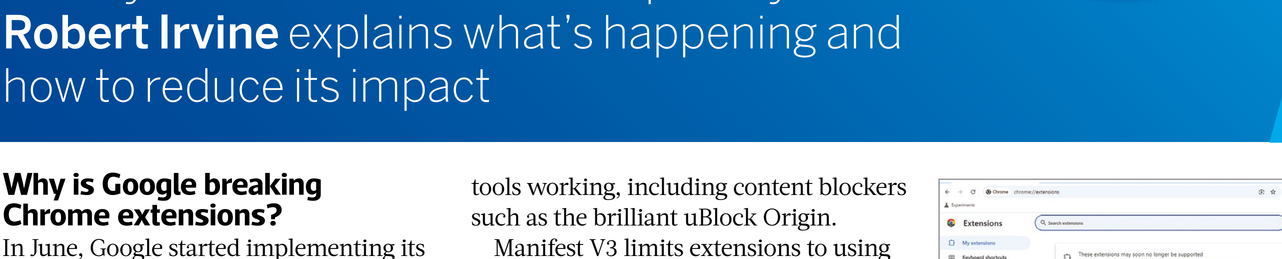
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Stop Google BREAKING your browser extensions



Google's controversial Manifest V3 plan may kill off your ad blocker and other privacy tools. **Robert Irvine** explains what's happening and how to reduce its impact

Why is Google breaking Chrome extensions?

In June, Google started implementing its plan to replace its Manifest V2 application programming interface (API) for Chrome extensions with its newer Manifest V3 (MV3) platform. The move was originally due to happen in January 2023, but was delayed while Google addressed some – but far from all – of the negative feedback from developers and privacy groups, who called the new system buggy, restrictive, "deceitful and threatening" (www.snipca.com/51710, see screenshot below).

Google says MV3 will give Chrome users "increased safety and peace of mind" when installing extensions, by providing greater transparency and control over permissions. It will also stop add-ons accessing "resources outside the extension's context", which could compromise your privacy and security.

However, the updated API will also break thousands of MV2 extensions. Most controversially, it will stop many privacy tools working, including content blockers such as the brilliant uBlock Origin.



The privacy group EFF believes Manifest V3 is harmful to online privacy

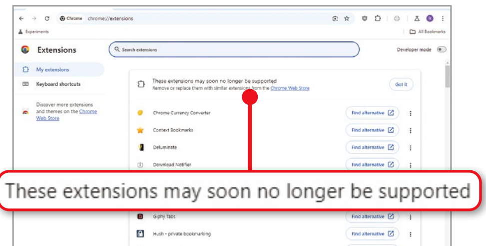
Manifest V3 limits extensions to using 30,000 static 'rules', with a cumulative limit of 330,000 rules across all the add-ons you have installed. That sounds like a lot, but uBlock Origin alone uses at least 300,000 rules to filter ads, trackers and other online annoyances.

Google will also stop content blockers updating their filter lists automatically. Instead they'll need to request approval for a predetermined blocklist of URLs through the Chrome Web Store. This means they'll no longer be able to block every new ad and tracker, which could prove very irritating for users.

How can I tell which extensions will break?

In July, Google added a warning to extensions that are not compatible with Manifest V3 in the Chrome Web Store. This reads: 'This extension may soon no longer be supported because it doesn't follow best practices for Chrome extensions', and appears in a yellow banner below the add-on's name.

You can still install these Manifest V2 extensions for now, but the option will disappear within the next few months and, if you already have them installed, they'll be disabled automatically. Google says that "for a short time", you'll be able to re-enable the unsupported add-ons (www.snipca.com/51693), but by the end of the year they'll be removed for good.



Chrome's Extensions Manager will tell you which extensions are about to break

To check which of your extensions will soon be defunct, click Chrome's three-dot menu button and choose Extensions then Manage Extensions – or go straight to chrome://extensions – to open the Extensions Manager. Here you'll see a section titled 'These extensions may soon no longer be supported' (see screenshot above), which lists all the Manifest V2 extensions you have.

If you don't see this section, it means that either your add-ons are all compatible with Manifest V3 or you need to enable it manually. To do so, type chrome://flags in the browser's address bar and press Enter to load the Experiments page. Find the entry Extension Manifest V2 Deprecation Warning, select Enabled in its dropdown menu and relaunch Chrome.

HOW TO KEEP USING YOUR FAVOURITE EXTENSIONS

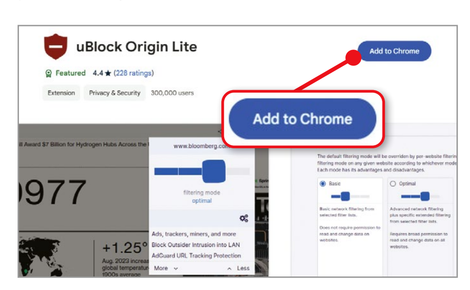
Switch to MV3-compatible versions

Google's plan to phase out its Manifest V2 platform has been known to developers

for several years. It began testing the Manifest V3 API in November 2019, and the Chrome Web Store stopped accepting new extensions built on Manifest V2 in January 2022. This has given developers time to update their add-ons to support the new system, or – in the case of content blockers – create new versions that are compatible with MV3, but may not work as effectively as the old ones.

The popular ad blocker AdGuard released an MV3-based Chrome extension in August 2022, which you can install from www.snipca.com/51694. This is still in beta at the time of writing, but AdGuard says it's "almost as good" as the old MV2 extension in terms of performance, and "most users won't notice significant differences", aside from the delay in updating filter lists.

As we reported in our News section in Issue 690 (page 6), uBlock Origin's developer has built a version of the content blocker called uBlock Origin Lite (www.snipca.com/51604, see screenshot below), which works with Manifest V3 and forsakes traditional filter lists in favour of the 'declarative rulesets and scripts' used by the new standard. He says this version won't replace the original, but that both will be available until Google permanently disables MV2 extensions, and is vague about whether you'll see a difference between the two. "Maybe. Maybe not", says the FAQ at www.snipca.com/51695, adding that it depends on the sites you visit and how you configure the extensions.



Install uBlock Origin Lite to keep blocking ads and trackers in Chrome



Chrome recommends alternatives to Manifest V2 extensions

Other privacy tools have already made the transition to Manifest V3. If you see a warning in Chrome or its Web Store that an extension will soon be unsupported, check if a new beta version is available that will let you keep using the tool.

Switch to alternative extensions

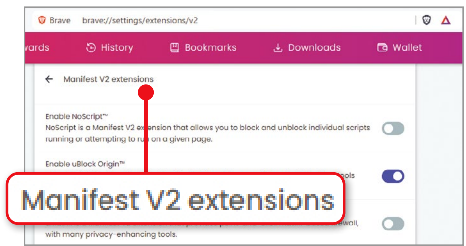
If no MV3-compatible version is available, you may need to ditch an old favourite extension for a close alternative. Google helpfully suggests replacements for soon-to-be-unsupported tools on their Chrome Web Store pages, and lets you access these suggestions through the browser's Extensions Manager.

In the list of extensions that may soon no longer be supported (see opposite), click the 'Find alternative' button next to a tool that needs to be replaced (see screenshot above). This will open a page showing four 'related recommendations' on the Chrome Web Store, so you can try them and decide which one you prefer.

Once you've made your choice, click the three-dot button next to the old Manifest V2 extension and select 'Remove from Chrome'. Or, if you'd rather stick with a favourite tool until the bitter end, choose 'Keep for now' to hide it in the list.

Switch to another web browser

The move to Manifest V3 will eventually affect all browsers that use Google's Chromium code, but so far only Chrome has confirmed a timeline for permanently scrapping Manifest V2. This means you



Brave will keep supporting Manifest V2 privacy extensions for as long as it can

can keep using your favourite extensions for longer by switching to a different browser.

The Microsoft Edge Add-ons Store stopped accepting new MV2 extensions in July 2022, but you can still install them, without any warning. In its guide for developers (www.snipca.com/51697), Microsoft says the date when Manifest V2 extensions will stop working in Edge is 'TBD' (to be decided). Both uBlock Origin and its Lite version are available in the Edge Add-ons Store.

Brave is putting up the strongest resistance to Manifest V3. Although it uses the Chrome Web Store, which means once MV2 extensions are removed you won't be able to install them in the browser, it has promised to support privacy-related add-ons "for as long as we are able", and specifically mentions AdGuard, uBlock Origin and script blocker NoScript (www.snipca.com/51698). It has added a page to its Settings that lists supported Manifest V2 tools (brave://settings/extensions/v2, see screenshot above).

What's more, Brave's powerful Shields system, which blocks ads, trackers, fingerprinting and other privacy threats, doesn't use MV2 or MV3, so won't be weakened by Google's meddling. Its filter lists will continue to update automatically, and offer "better, more stable protection than extensions". Similarly, Vivaldi expects to end Manifest V2 support in June 2025, but its built-in ad and tracker blocking won't be affected.

As Firefox isn't based on Chromium, you might assume it's exempt from the Manifest V3 change, but Mozilla has confirmed that the browser is adopting the new system. It started testing MV3 in Firefox 127 (released in June), but is more interested in improving cross-browser compatibility than obeying Google's strict new rules. Indeed, Mozilla has pledged to developers and users that it has "no current plans to deprecate MV2" (www.snipca.com/51699), so you'll be able to use your favourite extensions for the foreseeable future. **ca**

10 privacy extensions that will soon stop working

- AdGuard AdBlocker* www.snipca.com/51706
- ClearURLs www.snipca.com/51702
- Cookie AutoDelete www.snipca.com/51708
- Decentraleyes www.snipca.com/51703
- Disconnect www.snipca.com/51709
- Location Guard www.snipca.com/51704
- NoScript www.snipca.com/51700
- uBlock Origin* www.snipca.com/51707
- uMatrix www.snipca.com/51701
- Windscribe – Free Proxy and Ad Blocker* www.snipca.com/51705

***Separate MV3 version being tested**

Protect your network with GlassWire



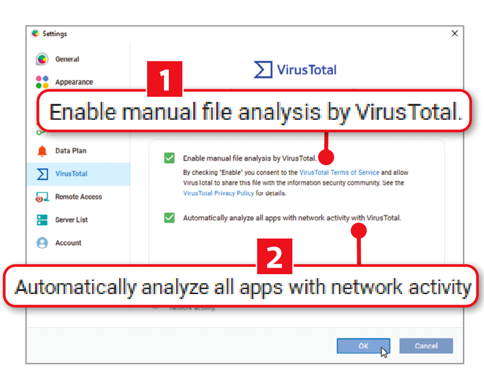
GlassWire is a powerful network-monitoring tool and firewall. **Nick Peers** reveals how to use its secret features to shield your PC and Wi-Fi from malicious activity

When it comes to keeping a close eye on your PC's network activity, GlassWire (www.glasswire.com) is hard to beat. It's easy to use and provides real-time information and alerts to keep you informed about everything that's happening in the background.

The free version of GlassWire lacks some of the paid-for version's advanced features, but it still offers plenty of tools to help you monitor and block suspicious activity on your PC. Here are five secret features you might have missed.

Connect GlassWire to VirusTotal

One of GlassWire's best hidden features is its ability to virus-check files and programs on your PC using 70 antivirus scanners, so you can spot security threats before they do any damage. You'll need to sign up for VirusTotal, so visit www.virustotal.com and click the blue 'Sign up' button in the site's top-right corner.



Connect VirusTotal to GlassWire to scan files and programs for security threats

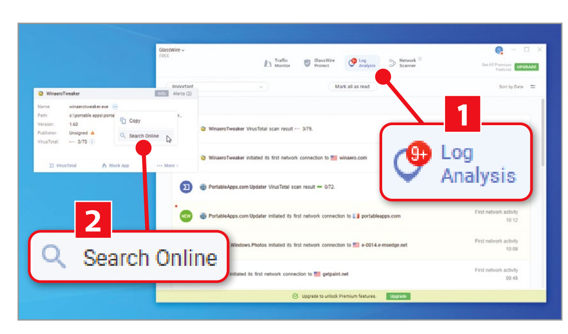
Once you've signed up, you'll receive a confirmation email. Click this to sign in and activate your account. When signed in, click your user account name in the top right-hand corner of the VirusTotal website and choose 'API key' in the dropdown menu. Click the Copy button to the right of the API key to copy it to your clipboard.

Open GlassWire's main window by clicking its system-tray icon then click the GlassWire button in the top-left corner and choose Settings. Select 'VirusTotal' and click the 'Add VirusTotal API Key' button. Press Ctrl+V to paste your API key into the box that appears and click OK.

You'll now see two tick boxes. 'Enable manual file analysis by VirusTotal' (1 in screenshot below left) is ticked by default, but we also recommend ticking 'Automatically analyze all apps with network activity with VirusTotal' 2 before clicking OK. This allows the tool to automatically scan all programs that connect to the internet to ensure they're not harbouring anything malicious.

View a log of GlassWire's pop-up alerts

GlassWire displays a pop-up alert when it detects that a program is trying to connect to your network for the first time. When you enable the automatic VirusTotal scan, a second pop-up will appear revealing the results of its scan.



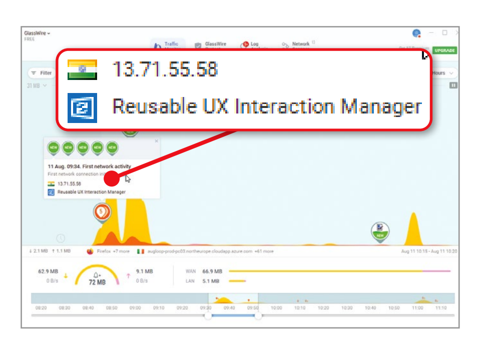
GlassWire keeps a log of network activity and lets you look up information online

If a pop-up comes and goes before you've had a chance to read it, click the GlassWire icon in the system tray to open the main window. Switch to the Log Analysis section (1 in screenshot above) where you'll see a list of recent alerts. Click the program name and the alert will pop up again, giving you another chance to read it. You'll see the program's VirusTotal score – if it scores more than 0, click it to check the full scan results on the VirusTotal website.

You can also find out more about a program by searching the web for information. Hover your cursor over its name, click the three-dot button that appears and choose Search Online 2.

Monitor the traffic on your home network

To get a detailed view of your network traffic, click the Usage button in the Traffic Monitor section. Here you'll see four sections: Apps (programs and processes on your PC), Hosts (the sites



Use GlassWire's graph-style timeline to review all your recent network activity

Don't rely on the GlassWire firewall

GlassWire's firewall component – which you access by clicking GlassWire Protect – is rather limited in the free version of the program. However, you can still check the GW scores for apps to see how safe and trustworthy they are. Hover your cursor over a score and click the 'i' button next to it to see how other GlassWire users have rated it.

If you see a red exclamation mark next to an app you trust, you'll also see an option to 'Trust the App' (see screenshot). Click this to mark it as trusted, which increases its rating for other GlassWire users.

If you discover an untrustworthy program, quickly block it by clicking the switch next to the entry. Sadly, this is where the free version of the program falls down, because you can only block two apps at a time. Upgrade to the Premium version (around £43 per year including VAT) to unlock all its features, or simply stick with the basic firewall built into Windows Security.

apps are connecting to), Traffic Type (the type of connection) and Countries (where in the world those sites are based).

Click individual apps, hosts and countries to find out more about each – for example, clicking a web or IP address under Hosts reveals which apps are connected to it (see screenshot above). Under Apps and Hosts, look out for connections that consume a lot of data. It's normal to find your web browser at the top of the list, but some Windows services (such as Host Processes for Windows Services) also occasionally download lots of data.

Traffic Monitor's Graph view lets you see when alerts occurred in relation to each other. Click the '5 Minutes' dropdown menu and choose '3 Hours' to zoom out for a longer view. You'll see a series of icons showing you when the alerts occurred. When multiple items are very close together, you'll see a number rather than individual icons: click one to review all the alerts in a pop-up menu.

Identify what's connected to your network

How many devices are connected to your network other than those you know about, such as your PC, smart TV and mobile phone? You can find out using GlassWire's Network Scanner, which shows what's connected to your network at any given time. Select the scanner and click Scan (1 in screenshot below) to scan your network for active devices.

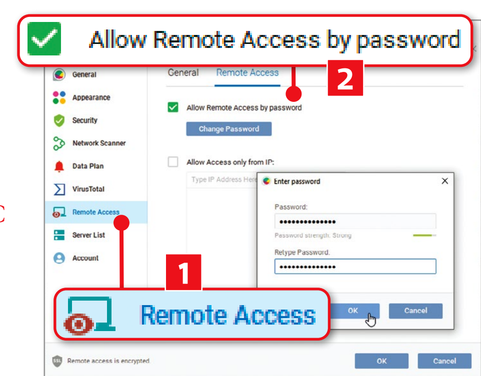
GlassWire's Network Scanner tells you which devices are using your network

The Network Scanner also stores a list of devices it has detected in previous scans – switch to the All tab 2 to view them. Each device is listed with its IP address and a six-digit hexadecimal MAC address, and some also display a manufacturer and device name too. For those that don't, look for the MAC address on the device itself – it's usually printed on the label.

Once you've identified each device, you can label them in GlassWire so they're easier to recognise (useful if their IP address changes for any reason). Click the icon to the left of the device's IP address to open a new window, then click Change 3 under the icon to select a new icon. You have a choice of over 40, covering most types of device. Finally, give the device a name you can recognise and add an optional description before clicking OK.

Monitor your network devices remotely

By installing GlassWire on multiple computers, you can monitor them all



GlassWire lets you monitor other computers remotely from your main PC

from your main PC, which is useful if you're worried about security. To do this, first open the GlassWire program on each device you wish to monitor. Navigate to Settings, choose Remote Access and switch to the Remote Access tab (1 in screenshot above).

Tick 'Allow Remote Access by password' 2 and click Change Password to set a password. You'll need this password to access the computer from your main PC. As a precaution, tick 'Allow Access only from IP', then type your main PC's IP address into the 'Type IP address here' field. Click OK to finish.

Now switch back to your main PC. Go to Settings then Server List and click Add New Server. Give it a suitably descriptive name, then enter its IP address and the password you assigned to it. Finally, select 'Enable connection' and click OK.

For each computer you've configured, a connection will appear in the left-hand pane. As long as the computer is switched on and linked to your network, a green dot will indicate that it's online, while a miniature graph shows its network traffic, which updates in real time. ca

Problems Solved

Our experts solve all your tech problems

PROBLEM OF THE FORTNIGHT

Can I buy a Wi-Fi 6 router with a SIM slot?

Q I can't receive full-fibre broadband in my flat, so a while ago I bought a TP-Link AC1200 4G+ router with a SIM slot (pictured right). Recently the wireless element stopped working, but it still operates with an Ethernet cable and, with an unlimited data SIM card from Lebara, it averages around 20Mbps for downloads.

That's not bad, but I wanted an even faster connection, so I went to a local Three shop. The staff told me Three's fast 5G mobile broadband service isn't available where I live, but they assured me I'd get at least 80Mbps over its 4G network. Sadly, it turned out to be much slower (I live on the top floor, surrounded by trees), so I returned it.

My desktop PC and laptop support Wi-Fi 6, but searching online I can't find any Wi-Fi 6 routers that have SIM slots. A few claim to be capable of wireless speeds well over 100Mbps.

I often help friends with their computers, and when they ask me how I know so much about it, I tell them it's thanks to your excellent magazine. However, this time I'm stumped. Do you have any advice?

Peter McDonough



The TP-Link AC1200's 867Mbps Wi-Fi speed is more than adequate for an incoming 4G connection



TP-Link's Deco X50-5G router accepts 5G SIM cards for fast broadband in areas that offer it

A Let's start with the idea that Wi-Fi 6 routers offer wireless speeds well over 100Mbps. That's certainly true, but the theoretical maximum of the 802.11ax (Wi-Fi 6) standard is considerably higher than that. Much depends on the specific devices and your environment, but in theory a Wi-Fi 6 router can transfer data wirelessly at up to 9.6Gbps, or 9600Mbps. So your 100Mbps figure is actually a lot lower than what's possible.

However, it's important to understand that these specifications relate to wireless data travelling around your local network – for example, when transferring files between two connected laptops. It has nothing to do with the speed of your incoming broadband connection. Indeed, in most domestic circumstances, the speed of your incoming data connection is very unlikely to exceed a router's theoretical top speed. Wi-Fi 5, for example, has a notional top speed of 3.5Gbps, and even Wi-Fi 4 manages up to 600Mbps.

If you're using a 4G or 5G SIM for your incoming broadband, you won't receive anything like these speeds, as you've already found with your Lebara and Three services. Yes, 5G can in theory deliver hundreds or even thousands of megabits per second (Mbps), but your tree-surrounded flat will probably only ever receive a fraction of those speeds.

So, unless you think you'll be able to get a fibre connection in the future, or you need to move data between devices on your network at blistering speeds, don't worry too much about a router's hypothetical top speed.

Your faulty TP-Link router's maximum speed of 867Mbps, for example, was more than enough to handle your Lebara 4G SIM's incoming 20Mbps data connection. This means a direct replacement would be perfectly suitable. The same model is currently available for around £98 from www.snipca.com/51411.

Wi-Fi 6 routers with 4G and 5G SIM slots certainly exist. The TP-Link Deco X50-5G (pictured left), for instance, costs around £250 (www.snipca.com/51412). However, while it's an impressive piece of kit, it would be overkill for you in your situation.

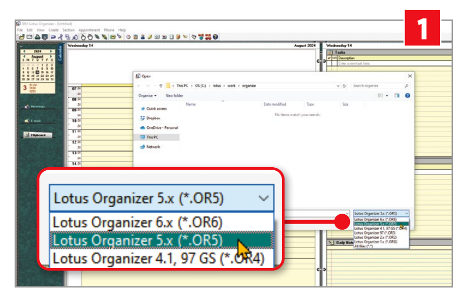
How can I make Lotus SmartSuite work again?

Q **I've been using Lotus SmartSuite for many years in various versions of Windows. I think the version currently on my Windows 10 Home PC came from an IBM archive site. The only part I need is Lotus Organizer, which I use to store my address book with hundreds of items. Sadly, I can no longer open it, and while I'm glad I managed to print a copy before it stopped working, I can't make any changes to it. Is it possible to get this program working again? The files are in OR5 format. I've found various sites that offer downloads of SmartSuite or Organizer, but none of them work. Alternatively, is there another app that can read OR5 files?**

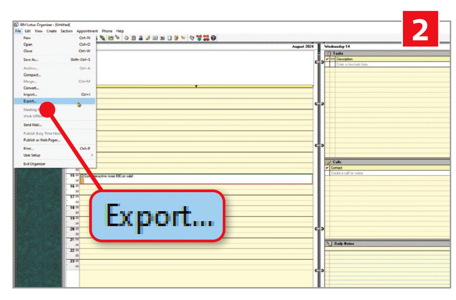
James Munroe

A We're not sure where you looked but we have good news. First, Lotus Organizer 6.1 is available to download legitimately from the Internet Archive at www.snipca.com/51415. Just click the ZIP file link to download it. This version still works in Windows 10 and should continue to do so unless Microsoft makes any major changes in a future update. What's more, Organizer 6.1 lets you open and work with OR5 files, which are files that were created in Organizer 5.

Once you've downloaded the ZIP file, expand it by right-clicking it, then choose Extract All. Inside, you'll find a file called 'Org61.iso', which is an ISO file of the original installation disc. You could burn this to a CD or DVD, but in Windows 10 you can simply mount it as a drive by right-clicking and choosing Mount. You can then install the program as if you were using the original disc.



To open an OR5 file in Organizer 6, select that option in the menu next to 'File name'



Select 'Export' from the File menu to save your file in a more widely supported format

To open your OR5 file in Organizer 6.1, click the File menu, select Open, then open the dropdown menu next to the 'File name' field and choose 'Lotus Organizer 5.x (*.OR5)' as the file type (see screenshot 1).

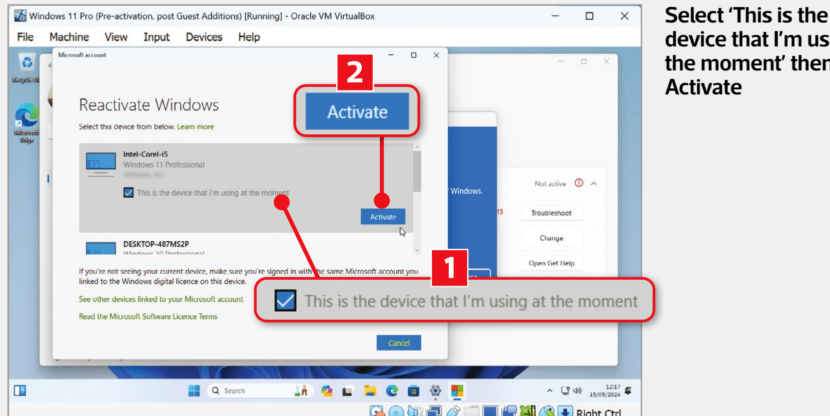
You can now continue as before. However, as a future Windows update could end compatibility with Organizer 6.1 without warning, it makes sense to export your data in a different format, such as the popular iCalendar standard, which many modern apps and services support. You can do this using the Export option in the File menu 2.

Can I reuse a Windows 11 licence on virtual machines?

Q **I'm looking at buying a Windows 11 OEM licence to run on a virtual machine because it's cheaper than a regular one. I'd like to reuse this licence on more than one virtual machine. Is this possible? Would I get into trouble with Microsoft?**

Ron Barton

A Yes, it's possible, as long as the virtual machine is running on the same computer, and no you won't get into trouble with Microsoft. Because the underlying hardware is the same, you can transfer your licence from one virtual machine to another. You need to log into the virtual machine using a Microsoft account, so the account can be transferred digitally. Do this by pressing Windows key+I to open Settings, then click System followed by Activation, then 'Activation state'.



Select 'This is the device that I'm using at the moment' then click Activate

To transfer the licence, you have to skip the prompt to activate the product key when you're installing Windows. Once installed, go again to Activation in Settings, then click the Troubleshoot button. When the 'Troubleshooting has completed' box appears, click 'I recently changed hardware on this device'.

If prompted, sign into your Microsoft account. A window will appear showing your registered devices. Identify your old virtual machine, then select 'This is the device that I'm using at the moment' (1 in our screenshot), and click Activate 2 to transfer the licence.

What's up with my Nook tablet?

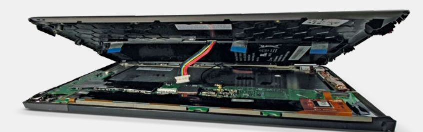
Q I dug out my old Nook HD+ tablet recently. The screen looks lovely and it performs well at first, but then everything goes haywire. If I try to read an ebook on it, for example, it flips forward and back through the pages or zooms in and out at high speed, without me touching anything. The Home screen behaves in a similar way. Any ideas?

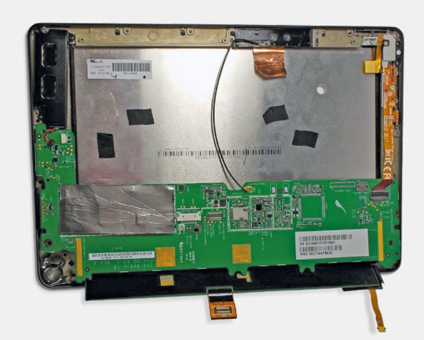
Joe Webber

A It sounds as if your tablet's display is suffering from ghost inputs. Assuming it's not wet or caked in dirt, this is probably a hardware glitch. It could be a broken screen digitiser (the touch-sensitive layer just below the glass), a loose connection or a cracked motherboard.

We'd suggest opening it up, following the Replacement guides at the excellent iFixit website (www.snipca.com/51413). In particular, follow the instructions to detach and re-seat the screen and connector (pictured below).

That might be enough to fix the problem. If not, you could look for obvious damage and then, if you're determined to fix this 12-year-old tablet, buy some spare parts from eBay or similar and follow the relevant iFixit guide to replace them.





The iFixit website explains how to detach and re-seat the screen and connector

Is our 5Mbps copper broadband at risk?



Despite the ominous name, the copper switch-off will happen gradually, not all at once

Q Living where we do in the countryside, we still rely on our copper phone line for phone and internet access, and there's no prospect of us getting fibre to the premises or cabinet (FTTP/FTTC). What will happen to us when the copper network is switched off? Will we still have our meagre 5Mbps connection and phone line, or will we be plunged back into the dark ages?

James Masters



Rural communities with no access to fibre will retain their connection to the copper network

A We've covered this before in Problems Solved, in our reply to Andrew Walker back in Issue 671 (page 64), but it's an important topic that's generating a lot of confusion and worry.

First, the switch-off will not happen overnight, and there will be many exceptions. The good news for you is that, as an exchange-only line, yours will almost certainly be one of those exceptions. If you use BT's services, for example, you may find that your existing analogue voice service is replaced with a digital voice service as part of your copper-based broadband package, but you'll still have phone access. That's assuming you decide to keep voice services, because you're not obliged to.

Until Openreach installs a fibre cabinet between your home and the exchange, however, your existing copper connection to the exchange will almost certainly remain in place. In other words, we suspect you can look forward to enjoying your 5Mbps broadband speed for a while to come.

Is replacing my antivirus software risky?

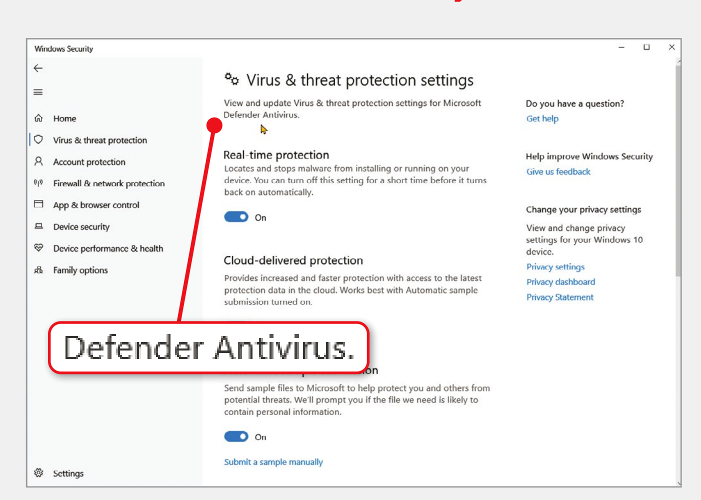
Q In Issue 687's 'Question of the Fortnight', you talked about the US banning Kaspersky antivirus and whether the UK might follow suit. You said that because this was a possibility, it would be wise to switch to a different antivirus tool such as Norton. This leads me to a simple question. Would I need to remove my existing antivirus software before installing Norton or another antivirus tool? If so, is my computer at risk in the time between uninstalling the old antivirus and installing the new one?

I hope you can help. I've been a *Computeractive* subscriber for many years and always learn something new from every issue, but I'm still not very confident with computers.

Clive Andrews

A If you're uninstalling one antivirus program then installing a new one, there could in theory be a few moments when your PC is unprotected. This period would be very brief, however, not least because without a third-party security tool installed, your PC would resort to Defender, the antivirus component of Windows Security (see screenshot). So we're really only talking about fractions of a second when your PC's defences might be down.

Think of it as like replacing the lock on your front door. For the few minutes the lock is removed, someone could in theory walk right in. Obviously, that's unlikely to happen, not least because you or the locksmith would be right there, guarding the entrance. You can take similar precautions on your PC, preparing everything in advance and ensuring that you don't do anything else with your computer during the process. If you want to be really cautious, you could even disconnect from the internet or switch off your router until the process is complete.



Windows will activate Defender, its own antivirus tool, if no other protection is available

Why has Google TV vanished from my TV?

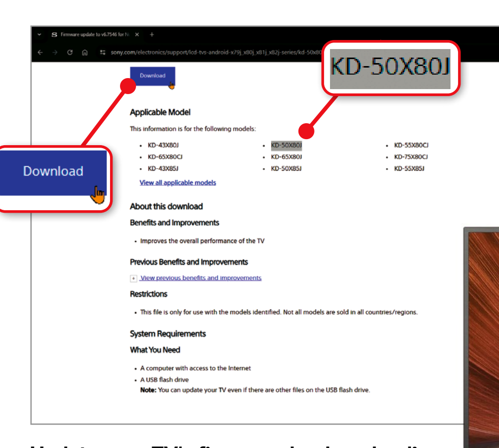
Q In 2021, I bought a Sony Bravia KD-50X80J TV (pictured right) that came with Google TV built in. All was well until a few weeks ago when the TV received an automatic update. Since then, Google TV has disappeared, and I've lost all access to my Fire TV Stick. I checked the Settings page but now I can't even perform an update.

Have you any idea what has caused this problem? I heard that Sony was thinking of ditching Google TV. Could the company do this without warning us? Does this mean I'll have to buy yet another new TV?

Phil Law

A Google has created such a huge mess of its TV branding over the years that to explain the situation would require an entire feature. However, we can say that while Google is winding down parts of its TV services, the Google TV brand itself remains – or at least the current version that you had on your TV. An earlier incarnation of Google TV was killed off years ago.

So, while we're not sure what has happened in your case, the disappearance of your Fire TV Stick and Google TV – coupled with the fact that you can't initiate an automatic update – suggests that an update went wrong.



Update your TV's firmware by downloading it from the manufacturer's website

As such, we'd advise applying the latest update manually to see if it can get your TV working properly. You'll need a PC and a USB stick for this. Visit Sony's support page for your model of TV, at www.snipca.com/51414, and download the firmware file (see screenshot). Then follow the detailed instructions that appear under the heading 'Use the USB flash drive method'.

Where's the PowerShell option in my Quick Link menu?

Q In Issue 686 (page 68), you answered my question about recovering a corrupted USB stick. You said I should press Windows key+X to open the Quick Link menu, then choose 'Windows PowerShell (Admin)'. I can't find this option on either my Windows 10 or 11 PC.

Glyn Foster

A Good old Microsoft. Why stick with one name for something when you can keep reinventing and renaming it to confuse everybody?

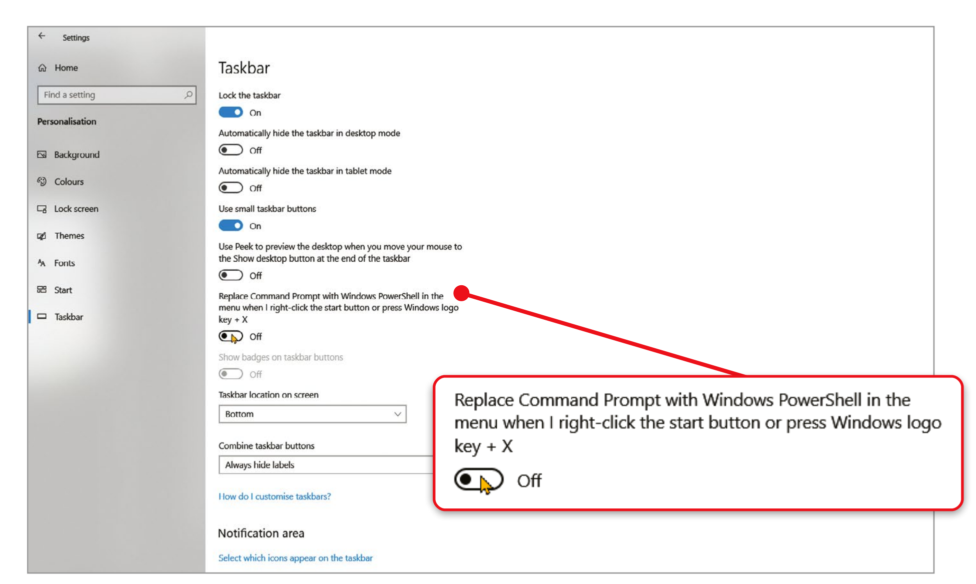
For background, Microsoft introduced PowerShell as an updated version of Command Prompt, which was a key part of Windows XP and 7. For reasons we'll explain in a moment, Command Prompt is appearing on your Windows 10 PC's Quick Link menu instead of PowerShell.

However, in Windows 11, PowerShell has been rolled into a new tool called Terminal. The instructions we gave would work in any of these command-line tools.

PowerShell should be a default entry in Window's 10's Quick Link menu, but a slider in Settings lets you change it to show Command Prompt instead. This must be what has happened with your Windows 10 PC.

To change it back, click Start followed by the Settings cog, then Taskbar. Next, in the right-hand pane, switch off the 'Replace Command Prompt with Windows PowerShell...' slider to its Off position (see screenshot).

If you'd rather follow our instructions on your Windows 11 computer, simply use the 'Terminal (Admin)' option on the Windows Key+X Quick Link menu.



Windows 10 lets you choose whether Comand Prompt or PowerShell appears in your Quick Link menu

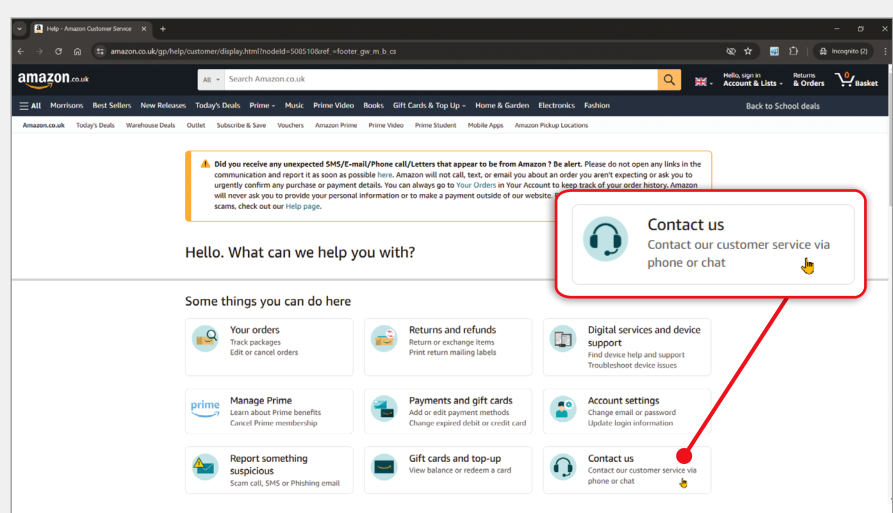
How can I contact Amazon when I'm locked out of my account?

Q I cannot log in or even contact Amazon because it insists on sending me a verification code with every attempt I make. Fair enough, I suppose, but this code is sent to a phone number that is no longer correct for me, so I never receive it. Hence, I cannot log into the Amazon website or even connect to any of its online help systems to inform the company of the situation – because I need the code to do so! It also seems impossible to find a phone number for Amazon. Can you help?

Roy German

A Big companies doing everything possible to keep their customers at arm's length is a bane of modern life – and customer-service phone numbers in particular are often buried deep in support pages, or hidden altogether. In this regard, Amazon is up there with the worst, with the 'Contact us' link (see screenshot) on its website becoming increasingly useless. So, we understand how you feel.

Only Amazon can let you back into your Amazon account, so we can't help directly with that. However, we can tell you that the phone number for the company's UK customer services is 020 7084 7911. So, that's the starting point for talking to a human advisor.



Amazon's 'Contact us' link is buried deep inside the website's support pages



WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN...

Contactless chips?

Q Recently, I learned that my iPhone apparently has a chip for contactless payments, not that I use that function. However, it made me wonder if I need any kind of protective case for my handset? I ask because I have a wallet with a 'blocker', to stop would-be scammers reading the chips on my various debit and credit cards. It strikes me that my iPhone could also be at risk. Or is it different in some way?

Charles Norman

A This is certainly an interesting thought but to understand why you don't really need to worry it's important to know the difference between the different types of technology at play here – namely NFC and RFID.

Near-field communication (NFC) and radio-frequency identification (RFID) are both wireless technologies, and certainly have plenty in common. Indeed, NFC is really just a 'subset' of RFID. Moreover, most if not all the cards in your wallet will feature wireless chips (pictured) that themselves are a subset of NFC, known as EMV, which is an abbreviation of Europay, Visa and Mastercard.



Payment cards – like Mastercard – have wireless EMV chips

Traditional RFID tags can be read over distances of a few feet, which is useful for stock control or security. Supermarkets might protect pricier clothing garments with RFID tags, for example.

By contrast, NFC and EMV chips are intentionally designed to work over much shorter distances – a few centimetres at most. This minimises the chance that nearby scammers will be able to interact with your debit or credit cards without your knowledge.

Moreover, for a variety of complex technical reasons the risk of this happening in the real world are very slim. Even if some criminal did somehow manage to steal a payment from an EMV-chipped card in your pocket, the issuing bank would know the receiving bank and account holder.

Your iPhone does have an NFC chip, for use with Apple Pay. However, it's even more secure than EMV, because it requires physical interaction to complete the payment – either face, fingerprint or PIN confirmation. So, we're not saying that an RFID-blocking wallet is useless, because it could theoretically prevent a scammer skimming EMV cards, but wireless shielding of this nature is not necessary with an NFC-enabled smartphone.

Want to know the difference between technical terms? Email noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

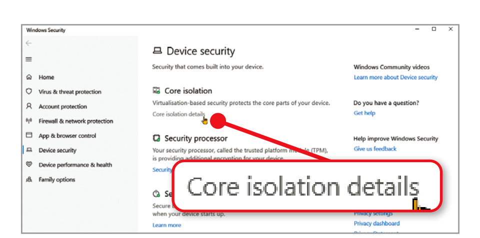
What does this 'Memory integrity' message mean?

Q When I open Windows Security in Settings on my PC there's a warning that my device may be vulnerable because 'Memory integrity' is switched off. There doesn't seem to be a way to dismiss this warning. What is this? Is my PC at risk? How can I fix it?

Roy Miller

A Memory integrity is a feature of modern PCs that minimises the risk of certain types of malware being able to run, by limiting what can use your computer's memory, how and when. It's a useful feature that should be left on.

However, that won't always be possible because some legitimate apps might be incompatible with this system. This tends to be older tools that were on your PC before you upgraded to Windows 10 or 11. It's impossible for us to know what these might be, but you shouldn't immediately worry about the 'Memory integrity' feature being disabled – though you should certainly try to switch it on.



Click this option to access the 'Memory integrity' On/Off switch

First click Start followed by the Settings cog and then 'Privacy & security' (Windows 10) or 'Update & security' (Windows 11). Next, in either version, click Windows Security followed by 'Device security' and then 'Core isolation details' (see screenshot).

If the 'Memory integrity' On/Off switch is greyed out, or switches back to Off when you try switch it on, then click the 'Review incompatible drivers' link. What you see next will depend on your specific PC setup. Search online for any listed drivers and associated programs, and then decide if you can live without them. If so, uninstall them, then return to the 'Core isolation details' screen to switch 'Memory integrity' back on.

Next Issue



- How do I regain control of my email domain?
- How do I set up a guest account on my PC?
- What streaming speed do I need? ...And many more

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Why can't I switch back to the old Mail app?

Q After reading your feature on ditching the new Outlook (Issue 686, page 62), I stopped using it straight away. However, returning to the old version hasn't been easy. Every time I click the Mail icon at the bottom of the screen, the new version opens. If I click Help at the top, a panel appears with the message 'Go to classic Outlook'. Clicking this brings up another panel that says, 'Windows cannot access the specified device, path or files. You may not have the appropriate permission to access the item'. If I close it and click my Mail icon again, it takes me back to the old version. To stop this happening every time I want to open Mail, I have to keep the old version minimised. What's gone wrong?

Alan Ingram

A We weren't able to replicate this problem, but there are several things you could try. First, repair or reset the Mail app to see if that helps. Assuming you're running Windows 11, go to Settings, Apps, 'Installed apps' and locate the 'Mail and Calendar' entry in the list. Click the three dots button next to it and select 'Advanced options'. Scroll down to the Reset heading. There are two options here. Try clicking Repair first (1 in screenshot below) to see if that works. If not, try the Reset option 2, but bear in mind that this deletes the app's data.

If neither option works, go back to the 'Advanced options', click Uninstall to remove the app, then reinstall it from the Microsoft Store (www.snipca.com/51169).

If you see errors when you launch the old Mail app, try clicking the Repair or Reset buttons

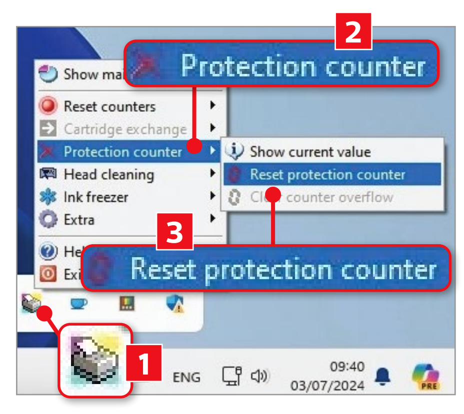
Where's the menu for resetting the printer cycle count?

Q In Issue 682 (page 56) you explained how to reset the print cycle count on Epson printers, which can extend their lifespan. I've opened the SSC Service Utility (www.snipca.com/50009) software you mentioned, but I can't see the menu that appears in your screenshot. I have an Epson ET-2711 printer. Can you help?

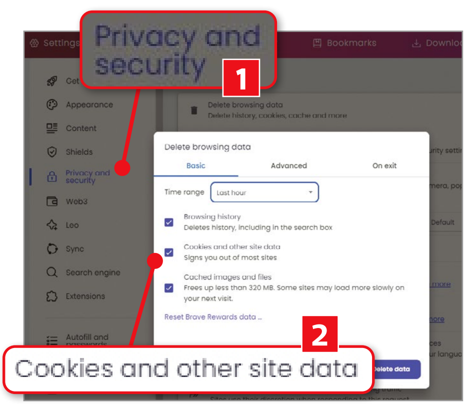
Robert Fairbairn

A We didn't explain this fully in Issue 682's Cover Feature because space was limited but, as our screenshot showed, the menu for resetting printer cycles is not actually in the tool itself. Instead, you need to click the SSC Service Utility icon that appears in the notification area to the right of the Windows taskbar.

If you can't see it, click the up arrow to reveal hidden icons. As long as the SSC Service Utility is running, its icon should be there (1 in our screenshot below). Right-click it, then select 'Protection counter' 2 followed by 'Reset protection counter' 3.



Right-click the SSC Service Utility icon to access the option to 'Reset protection counter'



Deleting Brave's cookies and cache might stop Brave showing prices in US dollars

Can Brave show prices in UK pounds?

Q After reading your recommendations for the Brave browser, I installed it on three devices. I like it, but there's one problem. If I search for anything that involves prices, they always appear in US dollars, even when the search engine says 'Showing results for United Kingdom'. This happens no matter which search engine I use. Is there any way round this?

Peter Grainge

A Are you using a VPN? If so, it could be affecting the currency Brave displays. Try turning it off and relaunching Brave. You could also try loading the page in a private browsing window. If that works, the problem may be an extension you're running. You can disable them all by clicking the Menu button (three horizontal lines) then Extensions, then re-enable them one by one to find the culprit.

If the problem persists, click Menu, Settings, Languages and make sure the localisation settings are set to 'English (United Kingdom)'. You could try clicking 'Privacy and security', also in Settings (1 in our screenshot above), then 'Delete browsing data' to clear your cookies, cache and so on 2. If all else fails, we'd suggest downloading the latest version of Brave from https://brave.com/latest.

Jargon Buster

1080p High-definition video: 1920x1080 pixels.

3G/4G/5G Technologies that deliver faster mobile broadband.

4K Video with a resolution of at least 3840x2160 pixels.

7z A format for compressing files into an archive format.

720p High-definition video of 1280x720-pixel resolution.

Adware Unwanted adverts that come with software.

AI Artificial intelligence. Intelligence demonstrated by a machine rather than a human being.

API Application Programming Interface. A system built into a program so that other programs can work with it.

Bandwidth A measure of how much data can be transferred through a connection at one time.

Benchmarking Comparing software and products with an accepted standard.

Beta A version of software that's being tested. Beta versions are often released so problems can be ironed out.

Cache A temporary space for storing data. Can be memory on a computer processor, or space on a hard drive used by a web browser.

cd/m² Candela per square metre. Standard unit of brightness.

Click latency The time it takes for your mouse click to register on your computer screen.

Code Programming languages used to create software.

Cookie A small text file stored on your computer by a website. Used to store browsing preferences, website log-in details and so on.

Core Units on a processor that carry out program instructions.

CPU Central Processing Unit. Another term for a computer processor.

Dampening Softening the impact of pressing or clicking a button on a device.

Dark mode Showing white text on a black background.

DCI-P3 A colour space that has a wider spectrum than sRGB.

Defragment To reorganise the data stored on a hard drive so files are stored in one piece and can be accessed quickly. Sometimes shortened to defrag.

Deprecation When a software feature is phased out and no longer recommended for use.

Digital signature An encrypted stamp of authentication on content including emails and software.

Dolby Atmos Surround-sound technology that adds 'height' to the audio through speakers built into the top of devices.

Dolby Vision Dolby's HDR (High Dynamic Range) screen technology.

Driver A file that tells Windows how to work with an external device.

DTS-X A type of surround sound used on some DVDs.

Ethernet A standard used for almost all wired computer networks.

EXE A program file designed to run in Windows. Has the file extension .exe.

exFAT Extended File Allocation Table. Microsoft's file system for USB sticks and SD cards.

False positive When an antivirus program wrongly detects a malware infection.

FAT32 An old system used for formatting hard drives, and still used for some portable drives.

Field of view The amount of space measured in angles that can be seen from the camera lens.

Fingerprinting A tracking method websites use to identify you from the device and software you're using.

Firmware Basic software stored on hardware, such as a processor, to control its operation.

Forked When developers take source code from software to make another program.

Fps Frames per second. Normally used to indicate gaming performance.

FTTC Fibre-to-the-cabinet. A broadband technology that uses fibre-optic cable between a phone exchange and street cabinets before transferring to the normal telephone wires.

FTTP Fibre-to-the premises. Fibre broadband that goes straight to the doorstep. Faster than FTTC (fibre-to-the-cabinet).

GPU Graphics Processor Unit. A chip designed to create 3D graphics, but which can also be used for other computing tasks.

Graphics card A component in a computer that produces the image shown on the monitor.

HDMI High-definition media interface. A type of connection that transmits high-definition video and audio signals.

HDR High Dynamic Range. Screen technology that improves the range of luminance between the darkest and brightest parts.

HTML Hypertext Markup Language. The language used to write most web pages.

IP65 International Protection marking. Dust-proof, and protected from water jets at any angle.

IP67 Resistant to dust, general dirt and sand and can be placed underwater for 30 minutes at depths of up to 1m without effect.

IP address Internet Protocol address. A unique set of numbers used to identify computers and websites on the internet.

IPS A screen technology. Monitors that use it have wider viewing angles and better, more accurate colours than monitors that do not use this technology.

ISO file A type of image file that contains all the data from a CD or DVD.

JPEG Joint Photograph Experts Group. A common type of image file created by most digital cameras.

KB Kilobyte. Unit of measurement for computer memory or data storage. 1,048,576 Kilobytes equals one gigabyte.

LED Light-emitting diode. An electronic device that emits light.

M.2 A standard specification for internal PC expansion cards and connectors.

MAC address Media Access Control. A unique code that identifies any router. A laptop PC might have one MAC for its wired network socket and another for wireless.

Manifest V3 Third version of the software that runs Chrome browser extensions.

Mirror Duplicating data across two or more disks in a NAS drive.

MVNO Mobile virtual network operator. A mobile provider that piggybacks on another network rather than building its own.

NTFS New Technology File System. A file system used by all recent versions of Windows.

OEM Original Equipment Manufacturer. Refers to components or software installed by the manufacturer.

Parallel port A single socket on the back of a PC used for connecting a printer or a low-cost scanner.

Partition A large hard drive can be split into two or more partitions or 'virtual' drives. Once partitioned, each section is treated by Windows as a completely separate, smaller hard drive.

Phishing A form of internet fraud that tries to trick you into revealing personal details.

Picture-in-picture Shows video in a small moveable screen while you browse the web or watch TV.

Plug-in A small program that adds extra features to software or to your web browser.

PNG Portable Network Graphics. A format for images that uses compression to shrink file sizes but without discarding any data.

Product key A unique serial number issued by software companies that must be typed in by the user before a program will launch for the first time.

QR code Quick Response code. A barcode that can be read using smartphones and dedicated QR-reading devices.

RAM Random-access memory. The computer's working area, used for data storage while the computer is switched on.

Read To access data saved on a computer.

SD card Secure Digital card. A popular type of memory card.

SIM Subscriber Identity Module. The smart card used by all digital mobile phones.

SMART Self-Monitoring Analysis and Reporting Technology. PC-testing technology developed by IBM.

Spatial audio A form of digital surround sound that allows the origin points of different sounds to envelop you from all directions.

sRGB A standard RGB colour space for use on monitors, printers and the internet.

SSD Solid-state drive. Storage that uses no moving parts.

TAR Short for Tape Archive. A format for archiving files and directories. They preserve the file and directory structure of the original files, including metadata.

Thunderbolt A very fast port for connecting external storage to a PC.

Transition A way of joining two video clips together or moving from one clip to another.

Trojan A malicious computer program that's disguised as a different, harmless program. For example, a Trojan may be disguised as a game but it's actually a program that steals your internet username and password.

Two-factor authentication A system that uses two different means to identify the user. For example, a code sent to your phone in addition to a password.

USB 2.0/3.0/3.1 Faster successors to USB.

USB-A The original type of USB connector, released in 1996.

USB-C A new connector that's reversible.

VGA Video Graphics Array. An older standard socket for connecting a monitor to a computer.

Virtual machine A software-based computer that runs inside another computer.

VPN Virtual private network. A secure internet connection that keeps all communication safe and private.

Wi-Fi 6 Wi-Fi standard with speeds up to 10 times faster than 802.11ac. Also called 802.11ax.

Wi-Fi 6E Wi-Fi 6 extended to include the 6GHz band.

Widget A small program such as a calendar that runs on the Windows desktop.

Write Save data to a hard drive.

ZIP file A file that contains compressed documents or files.



While he swelters in the summer heat, **Robert Irvine** tries his best to...

Cool down his computer

Be thankful that *Computeractive* is a printed magazine rather than a TikTok channel because I'm writing this column with my shirt off and sweat trickling down my forehead. Not because I'm ill, out jogging or working a part-time construction job, but because – as you may have noticed – it's been pretty darn hot lately.

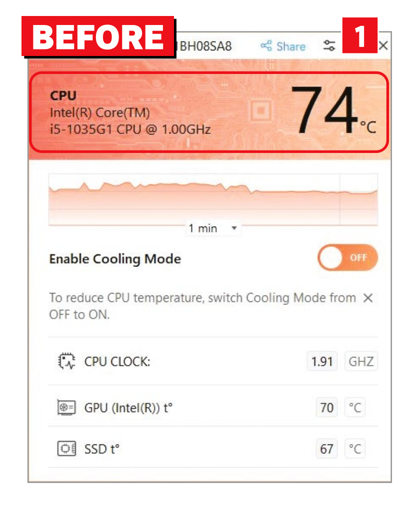


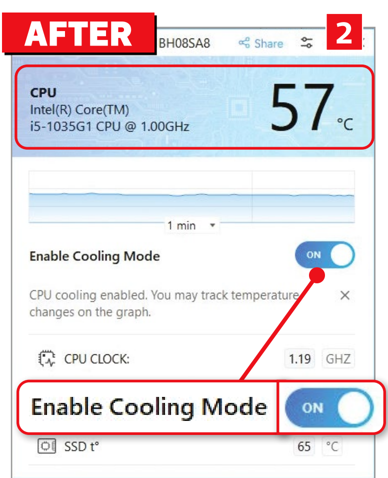
> My laptop may feel hot because it's angry about having Windows 11 installed

Warm weather in August is hardly a freak meteorological occurrence, but this summer it's been particularly stifling. And while I can cool off by drinking iced water or taking a cold shower, I pity my poor Windows 10 laptop, sweltering away in the scorching heat. The fact that its internal components can affect its temperature as much as any external factors has given me extra cause for concern that it might be overheating.

So I was interested to read about a new, free program called Camomile (www.snipca.com/51587), which "cools down a PC, ensuring optimal temperature even under heavy workloads". It also claims to make your laptop quieter and extend its battery life, which sounded like a win-win-win solution.

I downloaded Camomile and installed the program without any problems, having unticked the option to run it automatically on Windows startup, as I don't like that sort of thing. It launched to show a pop-up panel in the bottom-right corner of my screen, displaying the current temperature of my CPU.





Camomile reduced the temperature of Robert's Windows 11 laptop by 17°C once he enabled Cooling Mode

This was a slightly worrying 64 degrees Celsius – more than twice as hot as the temperature outside. Camomile also showed my SSD was 41°C and hard drive was 38°C, but curiously not my GPU, which it was either unable to detect or which was somehow maintaining a water-freezing temperature of 0°C.

To reduce my processor's temperature, all I needed to do was switch on the Enable Cooling Mode option. This was certainly simpler than some PC-cooling software I've tried, which involves fiddling around with fan speeds and hoping for the best.

Frustratingly, clicking the slider failed to enable Cooling Mode, so I instead tried the keyboard shortcut mentioned in Camomile's settings: Ctrl+Shift+Space. This did nothing either, so I looked online for help. I discovered that Malwarebytes is apparently blocking Camomile for being an 'unknown app', which its developer says is a false positive, but disabling Malwarebytes made no difference. I also tried selecting 'Enable Cooling Mode on launch' in Camomile's settings, then restarting, but again with no luck.

By this point my blood was starting to boil, and I suspected that a hidden Windows or hardware setting was preventing Camomile from cooling my CPU. Unsure what or where that was, I decided to cut my losses and install the program on my Windows 11 laptop instead.

Here, Camomile reported the CPU temperature as an alarming 74°C (see Before screenshot), with my GPU detected as 70°C and my SSD 67°C. This didn't surprise me, as the laptop is always noisily whirring away and sometimes feels hot to touch, as if angry about having Windows 11 installed.

I flicked the Enable Cooling Mode switch and this time it worked. Camomile's pop-up panel changed from red to blue, and my processor's temperature immediately began to drop. It eventually stabilised at 57°C (see After screenshot), a reduction of 17°C, with my GPU and SSD dropping to 55°C and 65°C respectively. The latter was still on the high side, but I noticed that my laptop had become quieter and less grumbly.

The program itself is lightweight and unobtrusive, so I'll keep it installed until the warm weather subsides, and hopefully identify what's blocking it on my Windows 10 PC. With its free download and one-click cooling, Camomile suits me to a tee.

Need help with keeping your PC cool? Let us know: noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Next issue: Robert tries to turn Windows 11 into Windows 10